

ABSTRACT

HUMANITIES

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IS THIS BLACK ENOUGH FOR YOU? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES PORTRAYED IN BLACK FAMILY
TELEVISION COMEDIES BETWEEN 1980 AND 2000

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Research shows that black people watch more television than any other race of people, and, given that television is the most influential media tool, the content of what may affect an audience's behavior and beliefs deserves analysis. This study examines the black family, alleged pathology, strengths that are specifically associated with them, its portrayal on television, and how television is used as a tool for socialization and influence. A content analysis of the top thirty black family shows that appeared on major network television between 1980 and 2000 was conducted to determine if the family framed was portrayed realistically. Each show analyzed was found to portray some characteristic of strong black families, attributes some media and social critics had not previously recognized or acknowledged. This study suggests that further research is warranted from black family, cultural, and media scholars, as well as social policy and

program makers, and on how television influences entire cultures to shift socially and economically.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES	viii

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Background of the Problem	3
Statement of the Problem.....	18
Rationale/Significance of the Study.....	19
Theoretical Framework.....	23
Methodology/Research Questions	34
Limitations	43
Definitions	44
Chapter Organization	46
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	48
Moynihan’s Pathology	50
Black Families: Successful Characteristics	75
The Rise in Television	85
Boob Tube or Teaching Tool.....	92

CHAPTER

African-American Adolescents: Analysis of Television’s Effect.....96

Rather Laugh than Cry: The Black Situation Comedy101

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....111

 Perceived Beginnings of Black Family Woes: The Black Man and
 the Black Woman.....111

 Diversity and New Trends in African-American Family Structures116

 Strengths of Black Families122

 Black Families and the Propensity for Portrayal132

 The Civil Rights Movement and Black Television Representation.....142

 Primetime Black Programming.....148

 Reagan Won and Television Turns.....151

 Black Families on Television.....163

 The Bigot Who Paved the Way for Black Family Television Shows.....167

 Why Laugh? Black Face, Black Books, and Black Humor as Resistance ...182

 Summary.....193

4. BLACK FAMILY TELEVISION SHOWS BETWEEN 1980 AND 1989197

The Jeffersons—1980198

Diff’rent Strokes—1981204

Webster—1982214

The Cosby Show—1984.....224

CHAPTER

227—1985.....	236
<i>Amen</i> —1986	243
Summary.....	251
5. BLACK FAMILY TELEVISION SHOWS BETWEEN 1990 AND 2000	252
<i>A Different World</i> —1987.....	252
<i>Family Matters</i> —1990.....	258
<i>The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air</i> —1991.....	263
<i>Cosby</i> —1997.....	278
6. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION	291
Results.....	291
Conclusion	298
BIBLIOGRAPHY	309

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Strengths of black families depicted in selected episodes of Top 10 black family television shows from 1980 to 2000297

LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Black Family Television Shows in the Top 30 between 1980 and 2000.....	39
2. Seasons and Episodes of Black Family Televisions Shows from 1980 to 2000 ...	40
3. Summary of <i>The Jefferson's</i> Strengths.....	204
4. Summary of <i>Diff'rent Strokes</i> Strengths.....	214
5. Summary of <i>Webster</i> Strengths	224
6. Summary of <i>The Cosby Show</i> Strengths.....	236
7. Summary of <i>227</i> Strengths.....	243
8. Summary of <i>Amen</i> Strengths	251
9. Summary of <i>A Different World</i> Strengths.....	258
10. Summary of <i>Family Matters</i> Strengths.....	263
11. Summary of <i>The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air</i> Strengths.....	277
12. Summary of <i>Cosby</i> Strengths.....	290
13. Characters' Relationship to Main Character: Shows from 1980 to 1985	293
14. Characters' Relationship to Main Character: Shows from 1985 to 1987	294
15. Characters' Relationship to Main Character: Shows from 1990 to 1998	295
16. Summary of Strengths of Black Families Depicted in Selected Episodes of Top 10 Black Family Television Shows From 1980 to 2000	296
17. Number of Black Family Strengths Depicted in Each Episode	298

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Television can provide a common bond among viewers. One of the institutions noted for forming bonds over television is the family.¹ Though television is able to bond groups together, it can also provide learning opportunities for viewers. A survey of white and black viewers found that any comedy show featuring black families is the most likely to be viewed by black people.² Watching programs with family not only offers the opportunity for families to spend quality time together enjoying something entertaining, but can also provide them with a learning experience. What people do not learn from their families, communities, or friends they can learn from television. Though television provides an escape from reality, it can also allow viewers to identify with a program's characters and recognize some truths and circumstances about their own lives. Television can teach a person about roles and expectations.

Between 1980 and 2000, it is likely that black people were influenced—in ways other viewers were not—by television shows depicting the black family. African-Americans watched more television than any other race of people.³ However, before this

¹ Sarah Coyne, Ashley Fraser, and Laura Padilla-Walker, "Getting a High Speed Family Connection: Associations between Family Media Use and Family Connection," *Family Relations* 61, no. 3 (July 2012): 426.

² Jennifer Hickey, "Knowing Who Watches What," *Insight on the News* 14, no. 21 (June 8, 1998): 13.

³ Brian Gordon, Mike Perko, and Michael Taylor, "A Review of Sexual Content in Black-Theme Television Programming," *American Journal of Health Studies* 22, no. 4 (2007): 218, 220.

time, between 1950 and 1970, blacks had roles on network television that either promoted cultural stereotypes or portrayed cultural colorblindness, compared to shows with primarily Caucasian characters.⁴ A significant change, however, began to happen at the end of the 1970s that contributed to an increase in the number of shows in which the storyline centered on the experiences of black families. At that time, and continuing into the early 1980s, middle-class white audiences began to demonstrate a preference for cable subscriptions to free network television, resulting in black audiences becoming the key demographic for network television.⁵ Therefore, the 1980s ushered in a period of numerous black-themed shows on commercial television.⁶ Shows with strong black casts that depicted black life began to appear in primetime spots on network television.⁷ These shows portrayed the positive attributes of black families and their relationships as well as provided glimpses of a better life with positive and productive loving relationships in the black community. Black television shows—that is, television shows with black casts, about black people and black life, during 1980s and 1990s—offered the African-American community a different perspective of black life if the family they viewed was different from their own.

Representations of black families on television have gone through many changes. Television shows depicting black families portrayed them in situations that contained elements of truth and true-to-life circumstances that many families may have actually

⁴ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xxi, 85.

⁵ David Joselit, "The Video Public Sphere," *Art Journal*, 59, 2 (2000): 48.

⁶ Gray, *Watching Race*, 56.

⁷ Kristal Zook, *Color by FOX: The FOX Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 3, 4.

experienced. These shows may have depicted role models who had family expectations to which the viewers may not have been accustomed. Some shows offered a perspective on what to be grateful for as well as examples of what to strive for in life. The black family depicted on television between 1980 and 2000 seemed to provide more than entertainment for the black viewer.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate if African-American family television shows produced between 1980 and 2000 accurately depicted the strengths of the black family. To accomplish this, the researcher analyzed the most popular shows during that period that depicted African-American family storylines and characters. Following an analysis, the researcher determined if the entertainment provided was characteristic of the black family or merely a simulation of what producers perceived a black family to be.

Background of the Problem

Media is a powerful mechanism by which people learn social behavior. No communication mechanism is more powerful than television programming.⁸ Television

⁸ Can Aytakin and Ugurlu Faruk, "The Humorous Role of Television: The Example of the Sit-Coms Sample Program," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 699.

enters more people's lives than any other medium.⁹ The messages and symbols relayed in television become a center of attention and interaction for the public.¹⁰

Many of today's television portrayals of African-Americans are not favorable. Some of the most popular shows portray black people in a way that persuades viewers who have interacted rarely, if ever, with blacks that behaviors and lifestyles experienced by a small number of black people are true for the entire group. These shows are reminiscent of white minstrel shows. Historically, the white minstrel performers in blackface entertained white audiences by poking fun at black people while convincing their audiences that slaves were content with their condition.¹¹ Black minstrel performers, at the end of slavery, entertained black audiences by poking fun at the system that oppressed them without directly implicating white society.¹² The black minstrel performance was political or social satire to which black audiences could relate.¹³ According to a study that examined the psychic hold slavery had on America, the use of satire to redress social injustice often turned a black production into a parody-like adaptation that assumed current audiences would be repulsed and revolted by the truth.¹⁴

⁹ Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Primetime and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 23.

¹⁰ Melissa A. Milkie, "Social Comparisons, Reflected Appraisals and Mass Media: The Impact of Pervasive Beauty Images on Black and White Girls' Self-Concepts," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (June 1999): 191.

¹¹ Robin Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 35–36, 39.

¹² Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 12.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Soyica Colbert and Robert Patterson, *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 135.

Instead, black audiences who experienced the black minstrel were entertained through signifying messages from the black minstrel performer.¹⁵

Today's television shows seem to entertain without political or social responsibility or consciousness. If a show is popular, media companies will produce more programs like it. Television shows today, especially reality shows that dominate the airwaves with black characters, are not using television as a platform to negate stereotypes. These shows have become conduits for perpetuating erroneous images.

If one tries to explain a minstrel, most would define him or her as a performer in blackface imitating a black person. However, at the root of the minstrel performance was that its intended audience enjoyed the depiction of a powerless culture and its mockery of higher classes. Minstrel performances mocked efforts to better a culture and instead showed it as incapable of fitting into white society.¹⁶ Television today, as it relates to black culture, is consistent with this premise. Even though the number of African-Americans on television has increased, the quality of the images has not.¹⁷

Televised media is a powerful social resource. It allows the viewer an opportunity to look at others' lives and experiences. It is also a resource for construction of cultural identity and consumed by audiences to formulate expectations for their lives.¹⁸ Television programming can shape individual identities. Viewers' identities can shift

¹⁵ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slaver to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 127.

¹⁶ Stephen Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁷ Narissra Punyanunt-Carter, "The Perceived Realism of African American Portrayals on Television," *Howard Journal of Communications*, 19 (2008): 241.

¹⁸ Chris Barker, *Television, Globalization, and Cultural Identities* (New York: Open University Press, 1999), 7, 31.

based on how they believe themes relating to them are addressed or represented.¹⁹

Cultural identity can be shaped and challenge the ideals of another's culture.

Experiences—including watching television—form identity, which in turn is influenced by culture and self-identification. Television is one of the most widely used forms of media that creatively and convincingly employs descriptions and stories of people.

Programming portraying positive African-American characters is limited.

Television is laden with acts and insinuations of sexuality, violence, and crime.²⁰ An average viewer sees 140 incidents of sexual behavior between unmarried partners, which occur three to four times more often than between married couples.²¹ Pertaining to families and marriage, these images can create an accepted ideology that shatters black families with the perception that positive, productive, and loving relationships between African-American men and women are not possible. The graphic sexuality contained in television dramas, comedies, and music videos reinforce this conclusion daily. Alterity (i.e., accepting otherness as opposed to strong, positive, productive cultural orientations) is present in characters' lifestyles, and this view of life does not support successful black families. Numerous studies on black television conclude that depictions that denote an understanding of a strong African-American family are missing. Successful, loving familial relationships between African-American characters are missing. As television is likely a model for social learning by children and young adults, such programs can be a

¹⁹ Barker, *Television, Globalization*, 8.

²⁰ Enid Gruber and Helaine Thau, "Sexually Related Content on Television and Adolescents of Color: Media Theory, Physiological Development and Psychological Impact," *Journal of Negro Education* 72, no. 4 (2003): 439.

²¹ Ibid.

negative influence when a viewer considers marriage or a desire to have a family.

Demeaning caricatures of blacks on television do not encourage black youth or young adults to see themselves as successful adults. These characters do not typically have successful relationships or positive outcomes in many aspects of life.²² However, there was a time when strong black role models were available on television and viewers had positive depictions of black people and families.

The Cosby Show came on the air in the 1984, and many social critics felt it was not a realistic depiction of black family life.²³ A survey of viewers found that though they did not feel connected to the show or that it was a true representation of black lives, they were able to recognize attributes of their families in the depictions.²⁴ Some stated that the show was just a wish—a fantasy of a black family living the American dream and in some ways surpassing it.²⁵ Others argued that TV shows following *The Cosby Show* model were successful in that the stories were relevant to all and colorblind.²⁶

This study, rather than consider specific storylines, focused on the significance of various series, some before *The Cosby Show* and others that followed it, as well as their depictions of families. Certain characteristics of the black family were evident and realistic, in spite of the criticism of the show's characters and situations as not being real,²⁷ and blurred the color line.²⁸ According to critics, shows like *The Cosby Show*, and

²² Robin Means Coleman, *African American Viewers*, xiii.

²³ Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵ Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 96.

²⁶ Zook, *Color by FOX*, 31, 35.

²⁷ Robin Means Coleman, *Say it Loud! African American Audiences, Media, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 192.

The Cosby Show in particular, did not provide a realistic portrayal of a black family.²⁹

Some have stated that the failure of black shows to address deep racial and black social issues gave the impression that there was not much difference between white culture and black culture.³⁰ However, significant cultural characteristics remained evident and their stories were recognizable as essentially African-American. Similar shows that came later also positively portrayed the black family.

The content of a black television show is important to the viewer regardless of his or her color. Television contributes to how stereotypical images can affect personal behavior and how others behave toward them.³¹ Television can nourish and sustain different ideals across years and even decades.³² Viewers tend to identify strongly with characters and storylines that mirror their lives and experiences.³³ By using characters and plots that are familiar, yet still different from characteristics associated with African-Americans, viewers can change their thinking and lead to mutually beneficial interactions among various cultures.³⁴

When television attends to some issues and ignores others, it shapes American public priorities and opinions. The more people watch television, the more their opinions and priorities change and will continue to do so as television moves on to something

²⁸ Michael Eric Dyson, *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture, and Religion* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 228–231.

²⁹ Coleman, *Say it Loud!*, 192.

³⁰ Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 82.

³¹ Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 113.

³² *Ibid.*, 73.

³³ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁴ Deborah Cherniss and Anthony Jackson, "Introduction," in *Black Families and the Medium of Television*, ed. Anthony Jackson (Ann Arbor, MI: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy, 1982), 3.

new.³⁵ This is especially relevant for African-Americans, who watch an average of 206 hours of television per month, significantly more than whites (149 hours), Hispanics (121 hours), and Asian Americans (89 hours).³⁶ Given this finding, blacks are more exposed to and engaged with television than other races. Therefore, the shows viewed can affect viewers more profoundly. The way in which a show is written for a specific audience can influence not only the target audience but also any viewer. Shows created for the pleasure of mainstream audiences may serve another purpose for a different audience. This is the case for black family situational comedies given space in network television—an industry controlled by whites. To negotiate that space, black family stories likely changed in ways that made them acceptable to white audiences. However, for black audiences they presented something different. Looking beyond surface humor to the dynamics of the family, one can see characteristics of strength. Those family characteristics and the way they are framed negate what former Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan considered a growing pathology: the destruction of the black family.³⁷ Television and the technique of framing can show the strengths of black families.

³⁵ Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Updated Edition), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 33.

³⁶ Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Total Audience Report: Quarter 4-2014*, accessed April 29, 2015, <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2015-reports/total-audience-report-q4-2014.pdf>.

³⁷ In 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan authored a study on the black family and black culture as well as its family structure and the values of the family environment. Its conclusions were that black family culture was a major source of negative black cultural traits and was a major cause of racial inequality in American society. The basis of this theory was that poverty breeds poverty. The conditions imposed on poor black families account for the pathological culture that keeps them improvised; generational effects, not lack of values, deter them from seeking upward mobility. See also: Leonor Johnson and Robert Staples, *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 28.

Whether on television or in person, those who view the black family may not see family strengths. Using a European-American family system to measure, judge, or rate an African-American family is not appropriate. Noted scholar and family therapist Nancy Franklin notes in her work *Black Families in Therapy* that many clinicians are unaware of the dynamics, diversity, and characteristics of the black family and do not explore such issues as they relate to their culture when addressing their patients' needs.³⁸ She also notes that a major issue for ethnic minorities (including black families) is that many times therapists have had only limited experience interacting with them and have not observed the home environment of their families.³⁹ Another challenge for therapists with regard to other ethnic groups is that they identify similarities between black families and their own families and assume the same dynamics are at play.⁴⁰

Family scholar Leonard Cassuto stated that the idealized family—that is, one that is positive and successful and consists of a husband, wife, and child (or children)—permeates all aspects of American social life. Therefore, media rendering of American family life depicted that particular family.⁴¹ He cites Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were*, an examination of the American family. Coontz feels that mainstream Americans have promoted the ideal family, which is a white family ideal, based on their own fragmented perception derived from their imaginations that historically has served as the model for all American families. The United States accepts this myth of the ideal

³⁸ Nancy Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience* (Second Edition), (New York: Guilford, 2003), ix.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 185

⁴¹ Leonard Cassuto, "The Real-Life Myth of the American Family," *American Literary History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 487, 488.

family, promulgated by the majority, which distorts important issues, distracts, misleads, and gives a false sense of its strengths.⁴² In turn, this has grievous consequences for families that are socially disadvantaged, such as the black family. Coontz notes that for the past 200 years there has been a writer saying that the black family is failing based on the white ideal of a family.⁴³

A black family has characteristics unlike those of a traditional American nuclear family or, in other words, the white American family. White scholars cannot understand the makeup of the black family (or why it functions as it does) unless they take time to learn its dynamics. Whites who find themselves operating within a black family (due to marriage or otherwise) without understanding its dynamics will likely find themselves confused and frustrated as they use the family in which they were raised—or an image of what they believe a family is—as a scale to measure a black one. Noted anthropologist Renato Rosaldo assesses how one interprets a photograph—imagined to tell the unvarnished truth—without ever considering or noticing how the image was the product of different depths, angles, and distances.⁴⁴ Whites watching blacks on television rarely see issues blatantly obvious to the black viewer.⁴⁵

To shed more light on this premise, consider the 1986 CBS documentary *The Vanishing Black Family: Crisis in Black America*. The young black men in the segment

⁴² Ibid., 489.

⁴³ Ibid., 490.

⁴⁴ Renato Rosaldo, “Where Objectivity Lies: The Rhetoric of Anthropology,” in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, eds. Donald McCloskey, Allan Megill, and John Nelson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 88.

⁴⁵ James Comer, “The Importance of Television Images of Black Families,” in *Black Families and the Medium of Television*, Anthony Jackson, ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy, 1982), 20.

were uninvolved and unreliable fathers. White audiences applauded the feature, but black ones were humiliated because the director failed to report the factors that contributed to the problem. When *Shaka Zulu* aired in 1986, black audiences found him to be a strategic warrior. White audiences found him to be a bloodthirsty killer.⁴⁶ Black viewers may view historical or fictional black characters as positive, but mainstream audiences may see them as negative and un-embraceable. Whites learn to disregard the motivations that those relegated to the margins of society may identify with or may have resorted to simply because they do not want to see them or judge them inferior.⁴⁷ When considering whether a television portrayal is real or accurate, viewers will assess the situation by considering the circumstances of their own lives.⁴⁸ Thus, white audiences who view black families based on situation comedies may pay more attention to the humor and completely fail to recognize the strengths that keep the family intact.

President Obama gave considerable attention to the family during his campaign in 2008. He often referred to his family through stories about his life and his upbringing. This led listeners to believe he considered family important and held the key to significant economic transformation. After the election, he vowed to place families at the forefront. This signified his belief that families needed the support of government. President Obama stated (as mentioned earlier) that families also served as a core social institution for organizing economic relations, whether generational wealth or economic

⁴⁶ Helán Page, "Black Male Imagery and Media Containment of African American Men," *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 1 (1997): 101.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁸ Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*, 47, 48, 52.

advantage.⁴⁹ As the world and the economy changes, so do the activities of people as they attempt to survive economic hardships. This also affects the formation and strength of families in which, traditionally, a man and woman marry and live in a home where the husband earns wages to take care of family expenses and gives the wife an option to stay home to care for children, if there are any. When people discuss traditional families in America, the assumption is that they are speaking of the white family.

According to today's standards, family members who grew up in households in which the family characteristics were not the norm (e.g., single parent households, same-sex marriages, extended families, etc.), but had middle-class socioeconomic status, can still be idealized from an economic standpoint as those who are living the American dream.⁵⁰ If we were to consider a television family as real-life depiction, the extended Winslow family on *Family Matters* is an example. Though there were three generations of family members living in the house, the combined resources of the family placed them in the middle class, and they lived well. The fictive kinship of the characters on the show *Living Single* placed them in the middle class and afforded them a lifestyle to which most would aspire. These examples show that other possibilities and characteristics outside the definition of a traditional American family should be included when determining whether a family is strong.

African-American family dynamics have evolved differently. Wealth and class are not the sole determinants of success and stability, nor are gender, blood relations, or

⁴⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, "Just another American Story? The First Black First Family," *Qualitative Sociology* 35.2 (2012): 125.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

marriage (though an intact marriage is one of the best roads to economic security).⁵¹ The poor have historically seen the marriage and family patterns of middle-class African-Americans as a way out of poverty.⁵² Regardless of whether a supportive and loving familial environment exists a poor, working-class black family has been the example of failure. Economic advantage in America can make a family acceptable and its unit considered strong, despite its makeup.⁵³ Families wishing to pull themselves up to a prosperous class may find encouragement by watching and mimicking other families whose lifestyles epitomize what they desire.

Census data indicates that the percentage of married and intact families has decreased over the last three decades.⁵⁴ There may no longer be many examples of traditional families in households, neighborhoods, or churches. Those without readily available examples of strong families will find models elsewhere to use in developing character and ideals. During a national book tour for *All About Love*, scholar and author bell hooks had a conversation with a group of schoolchildren that caused her alarm. The resounding sentiment she heard from the black children was that they believed love between black men and women did not exist. They told her that they did not know anyone who was married, were not aware of any families that were intact, and were not sure what love looked like.⁵⁵ To read this statement would make anyone who has experienced love wonder why a child would feel this way. What are they seeing or

⁵¹ Ibid, 133.

⁵² Ibid, 129.

⁵³ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁴ Robert Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 44.

⁵⁵ bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), xviii.

feeling that made them say this? One possible reason may be that children do not have examples of what they perceive to be loving families and relationships. If they are children who come from poor or working-class households, the socioeconomic class to which they belong can influence their perception of the black family as class can affect the way family members choose to show love. It may differ from what they expect based on what they have seen in the media or read in books. Working-class mothers may choose to work to ensure there is food on the table, and thus show love for her children by providing for them. Compared to a mother who cuddles her children at night and reads bedtime stories, the other mother's need to work as she does may result from the oppression and racism she faces. This is one example of not having access to resources that provide the means by which she could have enough money and time to have emotionally expressive time her children may desire.

Some black children, whether poor or not, may feel the brunt of their parents' frustration with the world and surmise that love in families does not exist. Writer Richard Wright believed that black people are incapable of love due to emotional scars created by racism and oppression.⁵⁶ Due to socioeconomic constraints, black parents may be pushed to choose between showing emotional love and expressing it through financial support. This premise confirms Wright's statement. If this statement is true, examples of loving relationships may not be present in their homes.

Beliefs and ideals often develop from experiences. Adolescents are impressionable and learn a great deal through social learning, which takes place during

⁵⁶ Ibid., 13.

the developmental years and includes modeling the behaviors they see, especially if they admire the person exhibiting the behavior.⁵⁷ Social learning by modeling provides children with a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes about their family, ethnic group, others, and themselves. These early beliefs and values frequently persist into adulthood. These behaviors come from not only family and community but also media, which competes with traditional socializing institutions.

Television is the most prominent mass communication outlet. It is the ubiquitous character of television in American society, along with its constant delivery of entertainment and information, which allows it to be such an important socializer.⁵⁸ If used appropriately, it can be a means of reversing the tangle of negativity surrounding the state of many black families in America. It can teach and support the strengths that black families possess either by subtle or blatant means.

Television informed the Civil Rights Movement and exemplified how it can change society's views and affect policies that make a difference in lives. The televised activities of the Movement of the 1950s and 1960s challenged the beliefs perpetuated about black people, who received an outpouring of support from the dominant society.⁵⁹ The world was able to witness the attacks experienced by blacks and their supporters, and this forced Americans to look at what was happening to their fellow citizens. Just as it

⁵⁷ Gordon Berry, "Black Family Life on Television and the Socialization of the African American Child: Images of Marginality," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 233.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁵⁹ Carlene Young, "Power and Group Identity," in *Out of the Revolution: The Development of African Studies*, Delores Aldridge and Carlene Young, eds., (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 231.

had an informative purpose during the Movement, it can now teach the world what a black family is, show its diversity, and suggest ways to solve any shortcomings.

Given how much television blacks watch, black family programming related to needs to be assessed to determine if what is being offered truly represents the African-American family. The content of black shows requires scrutiny to ensure that it improves our understanding of African-American life. Because African-American children watch television more than any other race of children in the United States,⁶⁰ television programmers should be inclined to offer shows that more accurately represent black life.

There is a lack of academic discourse about the strengths of African-American families. There often appears to be general misunderstanding pertaining to the dynamics of the black family.⁶¹ Academia has focused a great deal of attention on comparing black and white families, while overlooking the complexity of the African-American family system. This has resulted in the poorly defined concepts, negative stereotypes, and crude categories by which blacks often define themselves.⁶² Scholars discuss questions such as the destruction of the black family, marriage rates in the black community, and television's effect on black children. Also discussed are television's misrepresentations of black women and African-Americans generally.

However, research should also consider the effects of a lack of positive family and marriage examples in television on the development of family and familial identity in African-Americans. Few studies are available pertaining to positive black families on

⁶⁰ Gruber and Thau, "*Sexually Related Content*," 438.

⁶¹ Walter Allen and Angela James, "Comparative Perspectives on Black Family Life: Uncommon Explorations of a Common Subject," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

television compared to portrayals of blacks as violent, criminal, or highly sexual. If the fact that many Americans spend much time viewing television is considered, perhaps some discourse could consider the use of television as an artistic way to address family issues in the African-American community. Television can be a vehicle to teach and thus perpetuate the values and strengths of black families. All cultures exposed to media (and especially those as heavily exposed as African-Americans) are likely to believe the portrayal is true.⁶³ African-American viewers heavily exposed to their own culture via the television might begin to think differently.

Statement of the Problem

As television can be a valuable tool for socialization, black family television shows can serve two purposes: to entertain and to influence viewers positively. Black family-oriented comedies between 1980 and 2000 entertained but they may also have had cultural significance beyond just being a black show. The content of shows that dominated television during the black television show heyday (that time when black representation on television was substantial) deserves some analysis. Programs depicting positive representations of black family life and social situations surrounding it made them the leading shows from 1980 to 2000. They should be examined to determine what content could be considered significant to the black viewer and whether it is culturally realistic.

⁶³ Thomas Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals of African Americans on Person Perception," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (1997): 266.

Rationale/Significance of the Study

Television is a powerful vehicle that can influence social judgment by activating social constructs.⁶⁴ Television can be an excellent medium for learning. However, parents, government, schools, advertisers, agencies, broadcasters, and others who contribute to the creative process should take responsibility to guide people to be wise consumers of its content.⁶⁵ Television content must become part of the academic conversation researchers have when they consider television as a socialization tool, particularly in the African-American community.

During the 1980s and 1990s, African-Americans watched more television than any other race.⁶⁶ Prior to this time, black representation on major network television did not depict blacks in roles that promoted cultural colorblindness.⁶⁷ There was not a significant amount of black-cast shows on major network television, and for those in the shows that did appear the difference between blacks and whites was evident.⁶⁸ However, the 1980s ushered in an abundance of black representation in commercial television.⁶⁹ Research is available on the amount of television black children, teens, young adults, and adults watch. There are studies on how television affects the social development of children. Scholars have addressed, in detail, how television can influence the formation of cultural identities, and how, through framing, an audience can be swayed to accept or reject a culture. There are many studies about framing in the context of television news. Content

⁶⁴ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁵ Berry, "Black Family Life," 235.

⁶⁶ Gordon et al., "A Review of Sexual Content," 218, 220.

⁶⁷ Gray, *Watching Race*, xxi, 85.

⁶⁸ Herman Gray, *The Politics of Representation in Network Television*, in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 160–161.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 56.

analyses have been done about the amount of sex and violence appearing on black cast dramas. Reality television, videos, and the buffoonery of characters in black cast comedies are evident. However, there is little research available on television content regarding African-American families or the framing of black cast comedic shows.

The number of black television shows on major network television has declined. There was a time in American television history when there were a number of African-American shows on the air. This era could be considered the height or heyday of black programming in America. The significant number of programs on the air during that time suggests that those shows deserve some analysis to determine if there was something of value depicted. The apparent lack of black family shows on major networks today compared to that time in television history may suggest to scholars and social scientists that this area in entertainment deserves some attention.

Apparently, the content of those shows conveyed some meaning to their viewers and to social critics. Individuals identify and categorize themselves as a group member for reasons that include a sense of belonging, connection with group members, or shared beliefs or values.⁷⁰ A person can easily identify with another based on physical and animated features such as talk, hair, tastes, music, dress, and movements.⁷¹ Black television shows are relatable to black people who view them in that they are able to identify in some way with the production. As television is a tool for social learning, the content of popular black family television programming should be examined for its value

⁷⁰ Matthew Beverlin, Williams Delehanty, and Donald Haider-Markel, "Media Framing and Racial Attitudes in the Aftermath of Katrina," *Policy Studies Journal* 35, no. 4 (2007): 588.

⁷¹ Gray, *Watching Race*, 147.

and truth to ensure that audiences are getting useful messages that are factual. Research in the humanities and communications field seems to be lacking in studies pertaining to the content of those family shows that proved popular for audiences during the heyday of black television programming between 1980 and 2000. Television comedy shows that portrayed black families carried messages to their audiences. They are worth assessing to determine whether among those messages relayed there was support for the characteristics of strong black families as a mechanism for social teaching.

Black television shows produced between 1980 and 2000 were framed—intentionally or unintentionally—to counter negative findings and statements made concerning the failings of the black family. These programs not only showed the black family in a way that entertained mainstream viewers, but also signified to black viewers that what Americans had been led to accept about the black family was not true. It offered blacks the opportunity to recall those things that were good and strong in their own families and offered a truth for viewers who may not have known that black families were strong, loving, educated, and working. These shows were a teaching tool or, at minimum, a means of encouragement. Black family traits, which many non-black Americans believed were dysfunctional, were also part of a bigger picture. Blacks understood that, even within the dysfunctional families portrayed, strengths existed.

This study is significant because it considers selected black television shows, assesses how the family was framed, and identifies their comedic and cultural strengths. Each show may have offered something more for black viewers. Determining what it gave viewers can be measured by its evident strengths. Robert Hill's scale for the

strengths of black families is a useful instrument. This can demonstrate that there were positive depictions of black families on television during the peak of black television programming. As these shows were successful, they suggested to creators that there is value in these programs for other cultures, mainstream viewers, and especially black audiences. Furthermore, for those who have an interest in family issues within the black community, Hill's strength scale is beneficial. Television shows that depicted family strengths could serve the purposes of socialization and behavior modification.

For black children, seeing the strengths of African-American families on TV can be an essential component in forming their views of positive and supportive families and their attitudes and beliefs about marriage and family. Television competes with and often challenges teaching given at home and in other institutions. TV can stimulate changes in personal attitudes and opinions toward other people and activities.⁷² Comedies about the black family that were widely watched between 1980 and 2000 likely had those qualities. The programs, if they depicted true family strengths, showed how to move past the implications of what the *Moynihan Report* considered a tangle of pathology.

These comedies were, in a sense, protests against what the nation falsely believed about African-American families. Based on census information, a positive correlation between marriage rates among blacks in the United States and these African-American comedy shows is possible. In addition, college attendance and graduation increased as did employment rates and high school attendance and graduation during this period.⁷³

⁷² Berry, "Black Family Life," 234.

⁷³ Claudia Buchmann, Thomas DiPrete, Anne McDaniel, and Uri Shwed, "The Gender Gap in Educational Attainment: Historical Trends and Racial Comparisons," *Demography* (2011): 895, 897, 904, 908.

These trends might be the result of the influence of strong families. Television has great potential to shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that foster conditions conducive to reducing economic and racial disparities.⁷⁴

Theoretical Framework

This study theorizes that no matter which black-family television shows are chosen for analysis, there is evidence of strengths of black families as defined by Dr. Robert Hill. Critics have stated that black television shows between 1980 and 2000 may have caused more harm than good. Sklar, a critic of *The Jeffersons*, noted that although the show did provide more black visibility in television it essentially reinforced old stereotypes that the black actors were nothing more than comics.⁷⁵ This scholar has also critiqued *Webster* and *Diff'rent Strokes*, stating that even though the black child characters (who were adopted by rich white families) were cute and intelligent, they depicted blacks as both helpless and funny.⁷⁶

Critic Wendy Alexia Roundtree has stated that *The Cosby Show* created the false impression that black Americans had achieved the dream of success and had entered middle-class life while the other African-American communities suffered from poverty, an issue the show did not address.⁷⁷ Gate's critique of *The Cosby Show* supports Roundtree's stance. He has commented that *The Cosby Show*, in its renderings of

⁷⁴ Jerome Schiele, "The Personal Responsibility Act of 1996: The Bitter and the Sweet for African American Families," *Families in Society* 79, no. 4 (1998): 426.

⁷⁵ James Craig Holte, "Un-Melting Images: Film, Television, and Ethnic Stereotyping," *MELUS* 11, no. 3 (1984): 103.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Patricia Hopkins, "Deconstructing *Good Times* and *The Cosby Show*: In Search of my Authentic Black Experience," *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 8 (2012): 958.

successful blacks, actually sends the wrong message in that it tells white viewers that black people do not face systematic racism and that if they just worked hard they could be successful and enjoy the same opportunities as whites.⁷⁸ Though Roundtree and Gate's comments carry some merit, the messages of the shows depicting black families between 1980 and 2000 served another purpose. These shows served to positively encourage and influence their viewers, and such programs remained visible and viable especially when the characters seemed exceptional to mainstream audiences.⁷⁹ This exceptionalism may have been a factor that made the shows safe and attractive to advertisers and network executives, which in turn may have contributed to a black show's viability in network programming.

When a television drama program revolves around the lives and concerns of black people, they only last a season or two. However, a situation comedy has staying power (see the section on comedy in Chapter 3: Historical Context).⁸⁰ They are also influential. Busselle and Crandall found that those who watch situation comedies about black people believe that blacks are better educated and that they earn more. They also found that those who watch these situation comedies were not led to consider perceptions that differentiate between personal failure and social factors as reasons for a character's lack of success among blacks.⁸¹ This study also concluded that situation comedy viewing was correlated with higher estimations of average African-American educational achievement

⁷⁸ Joe Feagin and Leslie Inness, "The *Cosby Show*: The View from the Black Middle Class," *Journal of Black Studies*, 25, no. 6 (1995), 692–693.

⁷⁹ Sarah Nilsen and Sarah Turner, *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post Racial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 30–31.

⁸⁰ Heather Crandall and Rick Busselle, "Television Viewing and Perceptions About Race Differences in Socioeconomic Success," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 42, no. 2 (2002): 267.

⁸¹ Heather Crandall and Rick Busselle, "Television Viewing," 277.

and that these sitcoms portray a world of opportunity and comfort for both black and white races.⁸²

As the previous statement suggests, just as the exceptional African-American is acceptable to mainstream audiences, the same is true for black audiences. But a character's exceptionalism is not the only reason a black viewer would likely tune in as their reasons for watching may be steeped in a cultural recognition that certain aspects of the renderings are culturally familiar. Alison and Alameem-Shavers' study notes that black viewers tend to watch shows that offer diversity in the cast or those shows that depict a black lifestyle and black characters, even if they do not feel that the characters are accurate representations of their own lives and behavior.⁸³

Recall the minstrel. When minstrels performed, they often coded portions of their performances to speak directly to the black audience members. The performers were able to bring a humanizing quality to their performances and often coded messages to members of their race that white audience members would not be able to respond to because they would not see it or understand it.⁸⁴ Much like the black viewers of minstrel shows, when black viewers see black representations that may not depict them accurately they are able to pick up on things in the portrayal that are specific to African-American culture that mainstream audiences would not.

⁸² Ibid., 278.

⁸³ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers and Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), xxiv.

⁸⁴ Jake Austen and Yuval Taylor, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 6.

Representation is an opportunity for individuals to make choices and have a voice to speak on someone's behalf.⁸⁵ Stuart Hall notes that representation is the way in which meaning is in some ways given to the things that are depicted through the images of whatever is being shown on the screen, which stands for whatever is being talked about.⁸⁶ Representation is an opportunity for people to speak on someone else's behalf, to have a voice for themselves, and to make choices.⁸⁷ The more a viewer of a television show is exposed to these depictions, the more effect the show will have on its viewers.

A 2011 study of black female students determined that black girls were twice as likely to be suspended as any other race of student. It also found that black girls were more likely to receive disciplinary action than were white girls. The behaviors that the black girls were cited for were reminiscent of the stereotypical behaviors of hypersexual, hostile, and angry black women on reality shows.⁸⁸ Though the perceptions of administrators and teachers influence disciplinary action, in cases of disciplinary issues, the amount of time black students spend watching television may contribute to their behavior. That black adolescents watch television more than any other race of children⁸⁹ may, in part, suggest that if there is indeed a behavioral issue it may have been learned from what they determined was acceptable behavior as exhibited by those representations of black culture observed on reality shows. Just as negative depictions can lead to

⁸⁵ David Moody and Rob Obey, *The Complexity and Progression of Black Representation in Film and Television* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), viii.

⁸⁶ Stuart Hall, *Representation and the Media* (London: Sage Publication, 1997), 3–4, 24–26.

⁸⁷ Moody, *The Complexity and Progression*, viii.

⁸⁸ Alameen-Shavers and Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals*, 236.

⁸⁹ Valerie Adams-Bass, Keisha Bentley-Edwards, and Howard Stevenson, "That Is Not Me I See on TV: African American Youth Interpret Media Images of Black Females," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 2, no. 1 (2014): 79.

negative perceptions and negative behavior, so can positive depictions of black people lead to positive perceptions, treatment, and behavior.

The media can play an important role in spreading new ideas and demands for change.⁹⁰ It can be used as a tool to encourage social movements that challenge racial injustice. The aforementioned critics feel that some of the popular black shows depicted helpless, stereotypical, and comical black people in storylines that damage efforts toward racial justice and opportunity. The commentary below suggests that viewers saw something valuable in the black family shows between 1980 and 2000.

Scholar Robin Means in her study on black sitcoms conducted interviews asking viewers to offer their opinions on several shows, including *The Jeffersons*, *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Here are what a few of the participants had to say:

F.D. (about *The Jeffersons*). Here's a guy, got a little money from a loan to open up a cleaning business, and he is able to expand and move up. But it is good to show, yes, we can hire black people in the community.⁹¹

J.C.B. (about *The Jeffersons*). Yeah, I think it is important to see because too many of our blacks that achieve, the community for the most part tends to shun them and call them names, trying to be white and all this stuff like that. And I think it is positive to have more people that are showing advancement in life.⁹²

R.K. (about *The Cosby Show*). It was funny because, a lot of it I can relate to. The way they dealt with their kids, the way my parents dealt with me.⁹³

⁹⁰ Nilsen and Turner, *The Colorblind Screen*, 32.

⁹¹ Robin Means, "Black Sitcom Portrayals," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text Reader*, Gail Dines and Jean Humez, eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 80.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 87.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 80.

I.E. (about *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*). Phil treats the Fresh Prince just like a son...He is very loving and he treats him exactly like a son. I like the way they blend the two different communities (classes) together.⁹⁴

J.C.B. (about *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*). There are some good, like the Carlton character...He is a good kid. If I had a son, and I had a choice of my son being like this kid or like, say Martin or somebody, I would prefer this kid (Carlton) over here.⁹⁵

L.E. (about *The Cosby Show*). It was a show, for me, that helped me to be prideful about being a black person, because he [Bill Cosby] had guest appearances by famous black people, he was into jazz, he was into black art, they were definitely into education. It was excellent.⁹⁶

T.O. (about *A Different World*). The general setting of a school, it is a good positive impact on blacks. Showing blacks in school who have the ability and the desire to achieve and do well. So that was always a good thing, to see that setting for blacks.⁹⁷

Blogger Shervin Malekzadeh in his remembrance of actor Sherman Hemsley, notes what his Jewish family learned from watching *The Jeffersons* after immigrating to America.

News of Sherman Hemsley's death two weeks ago at the age of 74 hit hard around these parts. My mother called to share the news, and to offer the traditional Iranian blessing for the dead...Nearly 40 years after immigrating from Iran, she and my father remembered more than just a television show or a source of nostalgia. *The Jeffersons* had been an important part of our beginning here in the United States, of how we became Americans...Weekly broadcasts of a show like *The Jeffersons* provided a shared, collective, and national experience...Already, intuitively, we understood that the story being told at 185 East 85th Street was our own. Movin' on up meant moving away...Making it in America, making it in terms of the American dream, was compromised for George and Louise by their loss, and it was here that *The Jeffersons* showed us where the American and immigrant experiences converged. Because of who they were, and where they came from, the Jeffersons could never feel like they fully belonged in tony Upper East Side, or what my father liked to refer to as Grey Poupon society. The past pulled on them, and although

⁹⁵ Robin Means, "Black Sitcom Portrayals," 81

⁹⁶ Robin Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland, 2000), 193–94.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

neither ever forgot where they came from, the longer George and Louise stayed away from the old neighborhood the less they knew of their old selves... *The Jeffersons* taught us about what America was and could be.⁹⁸

Blogger Michael Blackmon of *Buzz Feed* asked his followers to comment on their favorite classic moments from black television shows. They made comments on *Diff'rent Strokes* and *A Different World*.

No one can forget the "Bicycle Man" episode of *Diff'rent Strokes*. Disturbing but you have to give them credit for tackling a subject that few shows would dare to address, even now.⁹⁹

The episode of *A Different World* where those students from a rival school and Dwayne and Ron all get arrested for an altercation outside of the football game. Each side has their own version of events that emphasizes stereotypes blacks AND whites hold. It gives me chills thinking about it because some of those divisions have not changed, 30 years later, but at the same time we're in such a better place to talk about it and that makes me proud.¹⁰⁰

New York Times blogger Katherine Schulten asked *New York Times* readers what television shows mattered to them. Many noted *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

The Cosby Show did not only change African-Americans' lives in television, but also impacted and changed their life drastically.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Shervin Malekzadeh, "What *The Jeffersons* Taught Me About Being an American," *The Atlantic* (blog), August 7, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/08/what-the-jeffersons-taught-me-about-being-an-american/260812/>.

⁹⁹ DavidCorse89, February 22, 2017, comment on Michael Blackmon, "What Are Your Favorite Classic Moments From Black Television Shows?," *Buzz Feed*, February 22, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/michaelblackmon/what-are-you-favorite-classic-moments-from-black-television?utm_term=.ha8EVdjpr#.veGM2O0Zp.

¹⁰⁰ Hannahb4a87c4bbb, February 22, 2017, comment on Michael Blackmon, "What Are Your Favorite Classic Moments From Black Television Shows?," *Buzz Feed*, February 22, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/michaelblackmon/what-are-you-favorite-classic-moments-from-black-television?utm_term=.ha8EVdjpr#.veGM2O0Zp.

¹⁰¹ Helen, October 6, 2014 (8:26 p.m.), comment on Katherine Schulten, "What Television Shows Have Mattered to You?," *The New York Times: The Learning Network* (blog), September 25, 2014, https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/what-television-shows-have-mattered-to-you/?_r=0.

I remember watching *The Cosby Show* when I was a little girl because my dad had loved the show very much and watched it pretty much every day. I had grown up watching the show and I had a connection with it because it really was a part of my childhood. As a kid, I had learned a lot about family values by watching this show and that is why my dad had appreciated the show so much as well. It was very comedic, but at the same time, a family show that you could learn many things from. The show laid the foundation for another show that I had grown up watching which was *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Although there weren't no new shows at the time of my childhood, I watched these shows often whenever it came up on the TV... It really is a show that can be watched years from now and it would still be enjoyed as much it is now ... (Of another show compared to *The Cosby Show*) This TV show is very realistic, brings real-life situations into perspective, and really shows the truth of how situations like autism, divorce, family issues, and cancer is really like. It is a show where people can learn many valuable life lessons and should be remembered no matter what time of age it is. *The Cosby Show* had done just that as well and it is a show that will always be remembered.¹⁰²

The Cosby Show without a doubt was watched and enjoyed by many audiences and you can even argue that it brought us closer together as a society... Nowadays, there aren't many shows that can impact us like *The Cosby Show* did.¹⁰³

I'm not really much of a television guy, but a show that meant a lot to me when I was younger was in fact *The Cosby Show*. It was very funny and usually I would watch it with my cousins and my brothers and my grandparents. We would always laugh to it and sometimes there were life lessons that were being taught to me through the show. Some older shows that are similar are...*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. I believe that even (though) *The Cosby Show* is very old, it will still be played in the future for many years because of its well-known usage of comedy and how it lured many families to their TVs (to) watch it.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Sneha_MrC_P7, September 27, 2014 (12:13 p.m. ET), comment on Katherine Schulten, "What Television Shows Have Mattered to You?," *The New York Times: The Learning Network* (blog), September 25, 2014, https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/what-television-shows-have-mattered-to-you/?_r=0.

¹⁰³ Matt A, September 29, 2014 (2:41 p.m. ET), comment on Katherine Schulten, "What Television Shows Have Mattered to You?," *The New York Times: The Learning Network* (blog), September 25, 2014, https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/what-television-shows-have-mattered-to-you/?_r=0.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel_MrC_P7_24, September 29, 2014 (7:23 p.m. ET), comment on Katherine Schulten "What Television Shows Have Mattered to You?," *The New York Times: The Learning Network* (blog), September 25, 2014, https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/what-television-shows-have-mattered-to-you/?_r=0.

Journalist Janiera Eldridge wrote about things she learned watching black sitcoms in the 1990s. She notes the following about *A Different World* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*:

Shows like *A Different World*... proved hands down that black people came from many different backgrounds and had different, shining personalities. Finally, the people on TV reminded me of my friends and I.¹⁰⁵

Black sitcoms excelled at mixing comedy with drama. The story lines in shows like *The Fresh Prince*... were both poignant and funny. These shows proved black people did not need to be shown as stereotypes to be funny.¹⁰⁶

Internet blogger Clover Hope of *The Muse Blog* notes how *A Different World* influenced her decisions pertaining to college matriculation.

For any pre-collegiate viewer, it was just as iconic and aspirational—even if you were light years from that place in life... the show played a role in my choosing Cosby's alma mater Temple, which then had a roughly 35 percent diverse student body. After a year, I transferred to Theo's school, NYU. In the back of my mind, I figured those places were good enough for the Huxtables... With *A Different World*, we were able to see relatable characters who were successful, cool, real—and occasionally screwed up—versions of our future selves.¹⁰⁷

Internet Movie Database, a database on television shows and movies, collects commentary from audiences about the shows they watch. The following are comments gathered on *Family Matters*, *227*, *Amen*, *Cosby*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, and *Webster*.

Family Matters has placed a positive staple on American television and has created some unforgettable moments that will be talked about from now until eternity. Part of the reason why *Family Matters* was a good show is not because of the topics that it covered during its lengthy run on prime-time television but because it also was a perfect contrast to another

¹⁰⁵ Janiera Eldridge, "4 Great Lessons Black Sitcoms Taught Me While Growing Up During the 90s!," *Movie Plot*, November 13, 2015, <https://moviepilot.com/posts/3637950>.

¹⁰⁶ Eldridge, "4 Great Lessons," *Movie Plot*, November 13, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Clover Hope, "An Appreciation: What I Learned Re-Watching A Different World," *The Muse* (blog), April 7, 2015, <http://themuse.jezebel.com/an-appreciation-what-i-learned-re-watching-a-different-1694612376>.

popular African-American show known as *The Cosby Show*. Even though the Cosbys were an upper class African-American family, *Family Matters* was about a regular, average family who had average jobs and average lives.¹⁰⁸

When this show (*Amen*) premiered, I was 8 yrs. old. I remember my family and I would sit down together and watch this great sitcom. It had great comedy, a good message about faith, and a great cast!¹⁰⁹

As a fan of all things sitcoms, I was happy this show (227) came about. Mary was a very good mother, even if she was overprotective toward her daughter Brenda. Lester was a loving and supporting husband who basically ran his own company... They dealt with problems and showed strong values when some shows strayed away from it. Unlike *The Cosby Show*, 227 did not mind talking about church and going to church or participating in church.¹¹⁰

The episode (*Cosby*) with Hilton's eccentric genius brother, George (played by the late Roscoe Lee Browne), is classic hilarity. It reflects the classic sibling rivalry and love between brothers whose lives took different paths but both ended up happy.¹¹¹

Even though it was a sitcom, the show (*Diff'rent Strokes*) was not afraid of tackling and addressing social and controversial issues such as child molestation, racism, bulimia, class division and sex for example...The concept was original and addressed the issue of child adoption in a straight-to-the-point manner but at the same time combine laughs with clean cut jokes, good gags and great humor.¹¹²

About *Diff'rent Strokes*—The interracial situations mixed with poverty and social clichés were the spinal cord for the plot and even in jokes.

¹⁰⁸ Actionmoviestar, December 22, 2005, comment on "Family Matters," *Internet Movie Database*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096579/reviews?ref_=tt_urv.

¹⁰⁹ Jennifer, February 8, 2001, comment on "Amen," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed June 3, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090395/>.

¹¹⁰ Televisionostic, March 12, 2007, comment on "227," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.tv.com/shows/227/reviews/>.

¹¹¹ Kimberly Owens, August 12, 2008, comment on "Cosby," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed June 3, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115144/reviews?ref_=tt_urv.

¹¹² Waiching liu, August 23, 2007, comment on "Different Strokes," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077003/reviews>.

Everything was extremely well done and executed with class... This show will teach you many things.¹¹³

This (*Webster*) was, in my opinion, one of the best sitcoms of the 1980s. It was funny, yet serious at the same time. It showed how families come in all shapes, sizes, and in this case, colors.¹¹⁴

Black family television shows between 1980 and 2000 were more than likely framed to portray the family in a specific manner. Framing is a process by which a communication source defines and constructs a political/social issue or event for its audience. It can determine what the audience thinks about a particular issue by stressing or framing a certain dimension of that issue or event.¹¹⁵ Framing can be used to influence and shape large-scale attitudes and can bring together strange bedfellows that differ in important philosophical assumptions.¹¹⁶ Consider writers of an African-American show writing about what they think takes place in African-American families. The way they chose to depict the African-American family can profoundly affect the viewers' opinions of an African-American family, whether intentionally or not—just based on how they chose to frame the family to affect whoever the intended target audience was. Frames are useful to anyone in power or who wishes to have great influence on public attitudes.

Again, as the aforementioned critics have noted, framing through a powerful tool such as television can encourage the denial and existence of the dominant society's contribution to poverty, racism, pathology, and illiteracy (such as programs that

¹¹³ Insomniac_rod, June 22, 2009, comment on "Different Strokes," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077003/reviews>.

¹¹⁴ Dmm316, September 27, 1999, comment on "Webster," *Internet Movie Database*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085109/reviews?ref_=tt_urv,

¹¹⁵ Jorg Matthes, "What is in a Frame? A Content Analysis of Media Framing Studies in the World's Leading Communication Journals, 1990–2005," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2009): 349.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

perpetuate stereotypes and consistently influence negative perceptions or programs that are so positive as to ignore important issues). All these contribute to the breakdown of the African-American family.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, if used positively, TV can present solutions to social issues and promote a picture of the black family by offering examples and positive lessons that can influence viewers to seek to preserve and rebuild the family in the black community. This study contends that the black family shows on major network television between 1980 and 2000 were used to encourage families. This study reviewed black family television shows to identify black family strengths. It supposes that no matter what shows were selected for analysis, each show depicted strengths of black families as defined by Dr. Robert Hill.

Methodology/Research Questions

Were there any indications of characteristics of realistic positive black families depicted on major network television between 1980 and 2000 in the shows selected for review? If a black family was portrayed on television, was it done so in a way that depicted the strengths and success of that family? In an attempt to answer the research questions, this study looked at characterization (social implications, relationships, interactions of the characters on the shows) and assessed if there is evidence of black family culture and if the strengths of the family are portrayed. To identify the family structure the characters are depicting, Andrew Billingsley's definition of the black family was used. How the constructs are addressed within the confines of the family and how

¹¹⁷ Christina Chin, Meera Deo, Jenny Lee, Noriko Milman, and Nancy Yuen, "Missing in Action: Framing Race on Prime-Time Television," *Social Justice* 35, no. 2 (2008): 146–147.

the family is depicted were reviewed based on Robert Hill's book *Strengths of Black Families*. This study reviewed and considered stereotypes, metaphors, actors, messages, and how the shows were framed. A response to the research questions were offered by analyzing selected television shows depicting strong black families.

This study reviewed selected television shows that depicted black families between 1980 and 2000. Shows were chosen by their network affiliation with preference given to those on major networks and their ratings. During the African-American television representation heyday, black people watched major networks because they were easily accessible.¹¹⁸ Those black family-oriented shows ranked in the top thirty for a programming season were reviewed.

The tool used to select the shows was a study by media researchers Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh that examined where television shows were shown and how they rated during specific program seasons. Tim Brooks was the Executive Vice President of Research for Lifetime Television. Prior to this position, he analyzed Nielsen ratings for Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, ABC, and NBC. He also worked as the Senior Vice President/Media Research Director for NW Ayer Advertising. He served as chair of the Advertising Research Foundation and the Media Rating Council and as a board member of the Cable and Telecommunications Association for Marketing. He was a professor of television, studied at Long Island University, and has written a number of books on the television industry.¹¹⁹ Earle Marsh was a researcher at the A.C. Nielsen

¹¹⁸ Herman Gray, *Watching Race*, 67.

¹¹⁹ Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable Shows 1946–Present*, 9th Edition (New York: Ballantine Books), 1833.

Company and later moved on to work in research at NBC and CBS. He served as the Vice President of Research for Showtime/The Movie Channel and as a media consultant for many agencies and networks.¹²⁰

When working at NBC in 1975, Marsh had an idea, which he shared with fellow researcher Brooks, to develop a research tool on television shows that their department could use in their own work pertaining to using prior series' ratings to forecast the success of new shows.¹²¹ The result of their collaboration was an extensive research project: an encyclopedia of regular television series that aired on broadcast and cable networks during primetime and late night hours (6:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m.). The encyclopedia is a definitive work of Nielsen rating data as well as network scheduling data.¹²² Nielsen rating reports provide information on each broadcast and its viewership. Nielsen ratings are the primary tool all networks use to determine the market performance of television shows.¹²³ In addition, they are important indicators of what the public enjoys watching.¹²⁴ Brooks and Marsh's encyclopedia, *Complete Guide to Prime Time Network and Cable Shows, 1946–Present*, was used to determine which shows between 1980 and 2000 were rated in the Top 30 and appeared on the “Big Three” major network television channels—ABC, NBC, and CBS.

For this study, all TV shows, seasons, and episodes identified above were written on separate sheets of paper, folded, placed in a bowl, and blindly chosen. In this way,

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., vii.

¹²² Ibid., ix-x.

¹²³ Steven Brams, “The Network Television Game: There May Be No Best Schedule,” *Interfaces* 7, no. 4 (1977): 103.

¹²⁴ Kenneth Goodpaster, “Ethics in the Professions: Business: Should Sponsors Screen for Moral Values?,” *The Hastings Center Report* 13, no. 6 (1983): 17.

episodes and seasons for each show were randomly selected. Three episodes from each show were reviewed. Those shows chosen were analyzed for content indicative of the strengths of black families, according to Dr. Robert Hill's criteria. The makeup of the family was reviewed, but strengths were measured using what Hill has characterized as the "strengths of black families." Hill's scale for measuring black family strengths was used to assess each show selected to determine whether the content includes the following characteristics: strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, strong achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation. Those with at least one strength depicted were considered a show that exhibits family strengths. If it exhibits two or three strengths, it was considered a show that is moderately strong in black family strength depictions. If it depicts four or five strengths, it was considered a show that is strong at depicting the strengths of African-American families. If strengths are found, this research noted that shows depicting black families between 1980 and 2000 were realistic depictions of African-American families.

Families were identified using Andrew Billingsley's definition of a black family. We use a black family definition as opposed to a traditional family definition in that the experiences of black families are a result of their historical fall-out from the decimation of traditional family forms in the black community.¹²⁵ To recap, Billingsley notes that "an African-American Family is defined as an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, formal adoption, informal adoption, marriage, or by appropriation sustained by a history of

¹²⁵ Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African American Families* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 45.

common residence in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures both internal and external to itself. Numerous interlocking elements come together, forming an extraordinarily resilient institution.”¹²⁶

Robert Hill defined black family strengths as those that facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit. These strengths are necessary for the survival, maintenance, and advancement of family networks. Strengths are not determined by their ability to function in only one area but in various domains of the family.¹²⁷ Although the five strengths identified can be found in other ethnic groups, they operate differently in black families due to racial oppression and slavery.¹²⁸ This study reviewed shows depicting African-American families to determine if the five black family strengths were evident. Shows were chosen if they were on major network television between 1980 and 2000 and in the Top 30 for at least two seasons. The shows are organized according to the year they first hit the Top 30 list for major network television shows. Table 1 notes the television show, network, year it ranked in the Top 30, and where it ranked. Table 2 denotes the year, seasons, and episodes during the time the show was in the Top 30.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹²⁷ Robert Hill, *The Strengths of Black Families: Twenty-Five Years Later* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 42.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 43.

Table 1. Black Family Television Shows in the Top 30 between 1980 and 2000

Show	Network	Season	Ranking
<i>The Jeffersons</i>	CBS	1979–1980	8
		1980–1981	6
		1981–1982	3
		1982–1983	12
		1983–1984	19
<i>Diff'rent Strokes</i>	NBC	1979–1980	26
		1980–1981	17
<i>Webster</i>	ABC	1983–1984	25
		1984–1985	25
<i>The Cosby Show</i>	NBC	1984–1985	3
		1985–1986	1
		1986–1987	1
		1987–1988	1
		1987–1988	1
		1990–1991	5
		1991–1992	18
227	NBC	1985–1986	20
		1986–1987	14
		1987–1988	27
<i>Amen</i>	NBC	1986–1987	13
		1987–1988	15
		1988–1989	25
<i>A Different World</i>	NBC	1988–1989	3
		1988–1989	3
		1990–1991	4
		1991–1992	17
<i>Family Matters</i>	ABC	1990–1991	15
		1991–1992	27
		1993–1994	30
<i>The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air</i>	NBC	1991–1992	22
		1992–1993	16
		1993–1994	21
<i>Cosby</i>	CBS	1996–1997	21
		1997–1998	25

Note. Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable Shows 1946–Present*, 9th Edition (New York: Ballantine Books), 1689–1695.

Table 2. Seasons and Episodes of Black Family Televisions Shows from 1980 to 2000

Year*	Television show									
	The Jeffersons	Diff'rent Strokes	Webster	The Cosby Show	227	Amen	A Different World	Family Matters	The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	Cosby
1980	S6-E12-24	S2-E14-24								
1981	S7-E1-8	S3-E1-7								
	S7-E9-20	S3-E7-20								
	S8-E1-11									
1982	S8-E12-25									
	S9-E1-12									
1983	S9-E13-27		S1-E1-13							
	S10-E1-10									
1984			S1-E14-22	S1-E1-13						
			S2-E1-12							
1985			S2-E12-26	S1-E14-24	S1-E1-13					
1986				S2-E12-25	S1-E14-22	S1-E1-11				
				S3-E1-12	S2-E1-9					
1987						S1-E12-22				
						S2-E1-11	S1-E1-10			
1988						S2-E12-21	S1-E11-22			
						S3-E1-9	S2-E1-9			
1990							S3-E11-25	S1-E13-22		
							S4-E1-11	S2-E1-13		
1991							S4-E12-25	S2-E14-25	S1-E16-25	
							S5-E1-12	S3-E1-13	S2-E1-13	
1992									S2-E14-24	
									S3-E1-13	
1993								S4-E11-24	S3-E14-24	
								S5-E1-12	S4-E1-13	
1996										S1-E1-13
1997										S1-E14-25
										S2-E1-12
1998										S2-E13-24

* No Top 30 black family television shows aired in 1989, 1994–1995, and 1999–2000

To be selected, the shows must have depicted a black family. The black family was identified by determining whether there were two black main characters (main character is denoted by a character present for at least three episodes for the seasons identified) and/or if family members who were present were related by blood, formal adoption, informal adoption, marriage, or appropriation sustained by a history of common residence. Family relationships based on appropriation are those families without blood or marital ties but in which people have decided to live and act toward each other as family.¹²⁹ This is the premise from which the notion of fictive kin is derived.¹³⁰ These are those persons commonly referred to as “play” aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, mothers, fathers, etc. The history of common residence means that at some point in history they shared a common residence with some part of the family at some point in time.¹³¹ They do not have to be in the same household to function as a part of the appropriated intergenerational kinship unit.¹³² The factor that makes these appropriated persons family is that they are always available to offer assistance or they are present when a fictive family member reaches an important transition in life.¹³³

In addition to the diversity of relationship ties by blood, marriage, or appropriation, the family has to be embedded in a network of internal and external social structures that interlock and form a family institution. Through these social structures major generative elements persist that make the family community capable of providing

¹²⁹ Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 31.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 31.

assistance and resources.¹³⁴ Those social structures include social class structure (diversity in families from various socioeconomic classes) and social institutions (occupational, religious, educational, and fraternal).

To identify the family members of the shows for this study only those members/characters for the period selected [year(s) that the show was rated in the Top 30] were noted. Family relation among characters is determined by each co-star's relationship to the main character in the main family (there may be instances wherein families are extended or intermingled with other family units considered a part of that black family).

Next, each show was reviewed to determine which strengths of black families were evident.¹³⁵ Characters and their tableaux were analyzed to determine if there was evidence of the following:

- A concern for family unity, loyalty, and inner-family cooperation (strong kinship bonds)
- An ability for self-help and the ability to accept help when appropriate (strong work orientation – desire and commitment to work)
- An ability to perform family roles flexibly (adaptability of family roles – traditional roles handled by non-traditional members)
- An ability to establish and maintain growth-producing relationships within and without the family (strong achievement orientation – educational and/or advancement aspirations)
- The ability to provide for the emotional and spiritual needs of the family based on a belief in a higher spiritual power (strong religious orientation – belief in a higher power or evidence of faith)

Robert Hill notes the following characteristics can be identified in each black family strength.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 70.

¹³⁵ Hill, *The Strengths of Black Families*, xx.

- Strong kinship bonds
 - Absorption of individuals: minors and the elderly
 - Absorption of families
 - Informal adoption (fictive kinship, relationship by appropriation)
 - Formal adoption¹³⁶
- Strong work orientation
 - Attitudes toward work (wanting to work, aspirations for work, desire for respectable work)
 - Double earners (both husband and wife work)
 - Job stability (when employed, desire/ability to hold occupation)¹³⁷
- Adaptability of family roles
 - Egalitarian family patterns (power equality among parents, shared decision making, shared participation in performing household tasks)
 - One parent families (functions in several roles as the single head of the family)¹³⁸
- High achievement orientation
 - High values
 - Desire for a good lifestyle
 - Achievement goals
 - High academic orientation (desire for educational attainment)
 - High occupational aspirations¹³⁹
- Religious orientation
 - Church/religious affiliation
 - Belief in a higher spiritual power¹⁴⁰

Limitations

This study did not review all shows ever produced that are based on the black family. This study also did not review the entire history of blacks on television, nor detail the significance of the increase in black representation on television. Instead, it considered shows that were in heavy rotation on major networks during a specific era of increased black representation on television. This study did not assume that shows that

¹³⁶ Hill, *The Strengths of Black Families*, 1–3.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6, 7, 9.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 14.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21–24.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

had black creators and directors were automatically ones that negate pre-conceived assumptions. Further, this study did not assess if negating racism and discrimination was the intent of the creators, writer, producers, or directors. It did suggest that the possibility exists for the creators to use television shows as a platform to combat racist ideologies by rendering positive portrayals of the black family.

Definitions

American Broadcasting Company (ABC).¹⁴¹ One of the Big Three major networks.¹⁴²

African-American/Black/Negro. All terms denote a person of African descent. African-American denotes a person of African descent who is American.¹⁴³ These terms are used interchangeably throughout the document.

Alterity/otherness. To make a thing different – discussions of identity in which the self is given meaning in terms of *other*. It is the state or condition of otherness. For example, when one identifies himself or herself, the person is either *A* or *non-A*. *A* is a positive, thereby constructing the other category *Non-A*. *Non-A* is usually perceived negatively, and its existence depends on the negation of *A*.¹⁴⁴

Audience. The people watching a entertainment program and to whom the media firms are directing their product.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 2nd Edition (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 67.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁴³ Harriette Pipes McAdoo, *Black Families*, 4th Edition (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), xiii.

¹⁴⁴ Phillip Bohlman, Maria Cristina, and Francesco Remotti, "Identity Barriers and Resemblance Networks," *Acta Musicologica* 84, no. 2 (2012): 139.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Turow, *Media Today: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, 4th Edition (New York: Routledge, 2011), 36.

Cable networks. Program channels offered by a cable television system whose stations are in addition to what is broadcast over the airwaves in their geographical area. Viewers subscribe to the program channels.¹⁴⁶

Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS).¹⁴⁷ One of the Big Three major networks.¹⁴⁸

Commercial television. A broadcast (over air transmission) television station that is supported by advertisement sales (selling time over the airwaves to advertisers).¹⁴⁹

Entertainment. Material that grabs the audience's attention and leaves agreeable feelings as opposed to challenging their views of themselves and the world.¹⁵⁰

Family strengths. A set of criteria to identify the dimensions of family traits which facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit.¹⁵¹

Genres. Major categories of media content – entertainment, news, education, and advertising. Each genre has a sub-genre. Under entertainment, the sub-genres are drama, comedy, gaming, and festival.¹⁵²

Major network television. The largest networks that distribute the most television programs to their affiliated stations that agree to carry an amount of the entertainment material on an ongoing basis. A major network has control over a media product from production, through distribution, to exhibition.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 450.

¹⁴⁷ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 71.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., xiv.

¹⁴⁹ Joseph Turow, *Media Today*, 453.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵¹ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, xix.

¹⁵² Joseph Turow, *Media Today*, 43.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 454.

National Broadcasting Company (NBC).¹⁵⁴ One of the Big Three major networks.¹⁵⁵

Network. An organization that distributes television programs to its affiliated stations, which agree to carry an amount of the entertainment material on an ongoing basis.¹⁵⁶

Nielsen Media Research. A data collection and reporting agency that collects information via meters and diaries to determine what people are watching. Stations, networks, and major advertisers foot the bill for this service.¹⁵⁷

Ratings. Audits of people's viewing behaviors that gauge which television shows are being watched in each household, how often they are viewing them, and how many are viewing them. The ratings help the networks decide which shows are viable and should stay on the air.¹⁵⁸

Series. A set of programs that revolve around the same characters or ideas.¹⁵⁹

Situation comedy (Sitcom). A form of comedy that is built around a recurring cast of characters placed in a humorous situation.¹⁶⁰

Chapter Organization

The introduction provides a background to television and the way it bonds families. It also offers some insight as to the increase in black representations on TV, and infers that people are influenced by what they see on television. This alerts the reader

¹⁵⁴ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 69.

¹⁵⁵ Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory*, xiv.

¹⁵⁶ Turow, *Media Today: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, 4th Edition (New York: Routledge, 2011), 454.

¹⁵⁷ Joseph Turow, *Media Today*, 464.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 448.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹⁶⁰ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 163.

that this study examined African-American families and major African-American television shows during a particular time and, despite criticism that these television families were not accurate depictions, points out that there were aspects depicted that are significant to black family life. The background also offers information on television and its content, which were shown to be a powerful influence and a strong social-learning resource as it relates to black people. The statement of the problem suggests that because television is a tool for socialization, it could be used to influence its viewers positively if its content were seen as realistic and plausible. As such, it is suggested here that the content of television shows depicting black families during a selected period should be examined for evidence of something more than just entertainment. The rationale supports the statement of the problem by suggesting that depictions of black families on television between 1980 and 2000 were realistic and whether, intentionally or not, they were framed in a way that helped black viewers identify with characteristics found in their own families. The researcher considered that a possible correlation exists between what those shows portrayed about black family life and the upward mobility of black people during that period. Finally, the researcher suggests that the black viewer was influenced by what Robert Hill calls the “strengths of black families.”

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review begins by reviewing what critics and proponents have stated about the content of the foremost research on the black family, the *Moynihan Report*, as it became known in black family studies. This section discusses where the notion of the pathology of the black family was birthed and then uses studies that negate Moynihan to provide a different view of the black family and the culture surrounding its makeup.

Next, successful characteristics of black families, specifically black family systems and structures, are discussed. This section begins by describing attitudes some blacks have about marriage and family. The review then examines what scholars have stated are successful attributes of the black family and how it is structured. Though similar to families within the dominant society, black families were exposed to specific experiences in slavery and as a result of systemic racism and discrimination makes them different from mainstream families. Because of their experiences, they should be considered and studied differently than dominant American families. This section also contains a discussion of other influences that shape attitudes about black families.

Following this is a discussion about the rise of black representation on television and the portrayal of the black family as they were imagined and represented by producers that never experienced black family life. The discussion touches on the lack of black television creators behind the scenes. It reviews how this deficiency contributes to

stereotypical roles played by black actors. As more minorities moved into production and writing, black representation on television was transformed.

The Boob Tube or Teaching Tool section addresses television and social learning. It reviews what scholars theorize about television's contribution to belief systems and behavior by considering children's exposure to television and how it shapes their identity. Insight into how television influences people is given. The researcher also ponders if television shows can address and correct social issues by altering social behavior.

The next two sections contain a review of works that reflect on television's influence on African-American adolescents and other races of people who view African-Americans on television. The researcher notes the behavior of African-American children and its correlation with what they view on television. Insight is provided into how other races are swayed to believe the stereotypes portrayed about African-Americans. The researcher then considers to what extent an influential show framed to depict blacks in a positive light reduces the influence of preexisting stereotypes.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of comedic television and how scholars have noted that it is the most influential genre of television, supporting the notion that black family life is depicted more in comedy than any other genre of show. Through an assessment of comedy, this section considers the role comedy has played in the portrayal of black life and why it is the genre where mainstream Americans enjoy viewing blackness. The researcher also suggests that comedies, though historically created to ensure mainstream American audiences are comfortable with what they view pertaining to black life, can be a vessel to demonstrate some truths about black people.

Moynihan's Pathology

The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, written in 1965 and commonly known as the *Moynihan Report*, reinforced stereotypes about the black family that many Americans accept.¹⁶¹ Moynihan's report stated that the Negro family structure is out of line with the rest of American society and, as such, retards the progress of the group.¹⁶² This suggests that any deviation by a minority from what the majority considers the norm presents a volatile situation to that minority and to society.¹⁶³ The thesis of the report is that the lower-class black family is unstable and produces a number of undesirable social behaviors that become pathological and generational and that this behavior is unique to lower-class blacks. It also states that the black family is largely matrifocal due to unemployment and high rates of illegitimate births, which leads to unstable family life in the lower class. Additionally, the report contends that the matrifocal lifestyle of lower-class blacks was the result of conditions extending from slavery.¹⁶⁴

Black family scholar Hubert Gutman staunchly opposed the *Moynihan Report*. Moynihan felt that at the heart of the deterioration of the Negro society was the deterioration of the Negro family and proclaimed that it was the fundamental source of weakness in the Negro community.¹⁶⁵ He believed that slavery and its destruction of the Negro family, which put the woman at its head, was the cause of the poverty tangle of

¹⁶¹ Susan Greenblatt and Charles Willie, "Four Classic Studies of Power Relationships in Black Families: A Review and Look to the Future," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 40, no. 4 (1978): 691.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Alan Berger and William Simon, "Black Families and the Moynihan Report: A Research Evaluation," *Social Problems* 22, no. 2 (1974): 146.

¹⁶⁵ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (New York, Vintage Books, 1976), 462.

pathology that weakened the black family structure.¹⁶⁶ Through his report, Moynihan urged the nation to strengthen the Negro family.¹⁶⁷ However, Gutman believed that Moynihan had confused the problems of poor blacks in the second half of the twentieth century with those of their great-grandparents in the first half of the nineteenth century. As such, he believes Moynihan misunderstood the history of both groups.¹⁶⁸ The cycle of poverty was not contributed so much to the effects slavery had on the black family. It was instead contributed in a large part to the male being unable to meet the economic demands of marriage and family life.¹⁶⁹ Gutman felt Moynihan did not make an accurate assessment or historical account of the family life of the enslaved African-American. Moynihan did not consider the adaptive capacities of slaves and their descendants.¹⁷⁰

Gutman's renowned study on the black family, as presented in his book, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750–1925*, negates many of Moynihan's assertions. Gutman's study was specifically encouraged by and resulted from the public controversy surrounding Moynihan's report.¹⁷¹ Gutman's objective was:

If enslavement caused the widespread development among African-Americans of “a fatherless matrifocal [mother-centered] family” sufficiently strong to be transmitted from generation to generation, thereby affecting the beliefs and behaviors of descendants of eighteenth-century African slaves who lived in mid-twentieth-century northern urban ghettos, such a condition should have been even closer in time to slavery. The tangle of pathology should have been as severe (if not more severe) in 1850 and 1860 as it was in 1950 and 1960.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁶ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (New York, Vintage Books, 1976), 462.

¹⁶⁷ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 462.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 463.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 463-464.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, xviii.

To support his premise, Gutman looked at the black family in slavery and following emancipation, between 1750 and 1925. Gutman looked at southern slave families, southern rural and urban households, ex-slave marriages and households, the black community in Buffalo, New York, and New York City black households.¹⁷³ Gutman found that slave registers in the south revealed a commonality in the development of African-American slaves' behavior and beliefs regardless of their location.¹⁷⁴ At its core were the adaptive slave domestic arrangements and kin networks that, over time, contributed to familial networks enlarging the slave communities.¹⁷⁵

When Gutman researched the slave registers in 1865–1866 Virginia, he found that most Virginia slaves lived in two-parent households and that the marriages of the slaves had been long lasting.¹⁷⁶ He asked if the force of the owner caused slaves to remain married or if slaves made the decision on their own.¹⁷⁷ Gutman suggests that corrective research is needed in instances of owner-forced behavior because there is little material on how the decisions of the owners affected Africans and their African-American descendants, and as such, a careful study of both the owner's force and the slave's belief and behavior is needed.¹⁷⁸

Gutman notes that most slave behavior studies are static in execution and conception because they only cover a particular moment in time.¹⁷⁹ Gutman suggests that this makes it impossible to determine the slaves' responses to their external

¹⁷³ Ibid, xviii, xix.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 34.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 32.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 32.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 32.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 33.

circumstances and how those behaviors were passed to the next generation.¹⁸⁰ He does note however that the slave's ability to retain such strong family ties, regardless of the owner's force or the slave's decision, is contributed to socialization.¹⁸¹ Gutman notes that most studies of slaves either have minimized or completely ignored the capacity of the Africans to adapt and how that adaptation was passed to the next generations of African-American slaves.¹⁸²

Many early twentieth-century historians and scholars of slave culture believed that slaves could only learn from their owners and as such, slave behavior and belief was imitative.¹⁸³ It is true that whom slaves learned from and how they learned affected their beliefs and behaviors and the choices they made.¹⁸⁴ Gutman cited Mintz, who stated that slavery gave rise to special conditions that prompted cultural change thus compelling the slaves to fashion new lifestyles in the face of tremendous repression.¹⁸⁵ As a part of his study, to further support the premise of how the African beliefs and behaviors surrounding family was sustained, Gutman offers a look at various slave communities that included slaves belonging to the Good Hope, Stirling, and Cohoon farms and plantations. These slave communities differed in type of ownership, location, age of the slave community, and size of the community.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 33.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 33.

¹⁸² Ibid, 31.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 32.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 31.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 33.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 104.

The Good Hope plantation in South Carolina was owned by Joseph Dulles,¹⁸⁷ an absentee owner.¹⁸⁸ His plantation consisted of intergenerational and intragenerational slaves, whose families developed from 1775 to 1856.¹⁸⁹ The Good Hope slaves seemed to be the model for which Gutman compared many of the other slave families. Those who reported the births of slaves on the Good Hope plantation did something unusual—their records are relatively complete and they recorded the names of the fathers.¹⁹⁰ Its first recorded birth took place in Africa in 1760 and the last was 96 years later in 1857.¹⁹¹ Their records covered almost the entire experience of African and African-American slavery from African birth, enslavement, South Carolina plantation slavery, development of adaptive slave culture, emancipation, and life as freed persons.¹⁹²

The Good Hope owners, who were not present to operate the plantation, did not break up the slave families.¹⁹³ Between 1800 and 1857 most of the Good Hope slave adults were in permanent unions and the children grew up in those families.¹⁹⁴ Even though there were many instances whereby the women had children by different mates, most women settled into permanent marriages.¹⁹⁵ The slave children were named for those within and outside immediate blood kin.¹⁹⁶ The majority of the mothers had their

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 46.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 104.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 52-58.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 46.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 46.

¹⁹² Ibid, 46.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 52.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 58.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 60.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 113.

first child at 19¹⁹⁷ and the parents who married remained together for long, significant periods.¹⁹⁸ Good Hope children grew up in large families.¹⁹⁹

The Stirling farm in Louisiana was resident owned (owner lived on the farm) by Lewis Stirling.²⁰⁰ His slave families were traced back as far as 1807 to the native Africans living on the Stirling plantation.²⁰¹ The slave families had a significant amount of time to develop between 1807 and 1865.²⁰² Like the Good Hope slaves, the Stirling slave families were intergenerational and intragenerational slaves that connected distinct immediate families within kinship networks, whose children were named for those within and outside immediate blood kin²⁰³ Compared to the Good Hope slaves, marriages occurred among some cousins but not first blood cousins. The median age of marriage was 18, and the age of the mother at her first birth was the same. Between 1807 and 1855, nearly all of the children born on the Stirling plantation were similar to those born on the Good Hope plantation—some were born of unmarried mothers who later married, had many more children, and remained married.²⁰⁴

Like most Good Hope slave families, Stirling slave families were large and conventional.²⁰⁵ However, beginning as early as 1836, and most notably around 1855, a significant difference in households developed on the Stirling plantation. The number of children born to single-mother households where the father was not named began to

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 50.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 51.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 50.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 104.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 114.

²⁰² Ibid, 105-113, 119-121.

²⁰³ Ibid, 104.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 114.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 115.

grow.²⁰⁶ The mothers had chosen to stay single. This was atypical in comparison to the Good Hope slaves.²⁰⁷ Gutman notes that this is probably not linked to a West African domestic arrangement in that the mother and her children would have been a matricentric cell added to the larger polygynous family.²⁰⁸ If this had been an African norm, it would have thrived among first, second, and third generation slaves on the Stirling plantation. However, of those children born prior to 1839, 183 were raised in conventional two-parent households.²⁰⁹ Though the conventional domestic arrangement was the all-time characteristic arrangement, on the Stirling plantation it seemed to begin to decline in importance.²¹⁰ What is important in this dynamic is that the slave owner allowed his slaves to make their own choices. This is indicative of the actions of slaves deciding to behave in a manner they choose as opposed to exhibiting behavior in accordance to the owner's desires or of African behaviors passed down over generations.²¹¹

The Cape Vale plantation was owned by the Cohoon family in Virginia. The Cohoons were resident owners, whose slave register records, recorded by John Cohoon, Jr., show data from 1811 to 1862.²¹² Cohoon slaves were obtained through purchase, inheritance, or by gift through marriage.²¹³ The Cohoon slaves experienced much family

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 115.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 116.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 118.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 118.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 118.

²¹¹ Ibid, 118.

²¹² Ibid, 125-128.

²¹³ Ibid, 124.

disruption from the beginning of John Cohoon, Jr.'s career as a slave owner.²¹⁴ Many of the slaves were transferred in ownerships because of sale, gifts, and the owner's death.²¹⁵

The early Cohoon slaves were subjected to a cycle of family destruction, construction, and dispersal that lasted more than half a century, dictated by the Cohoon family's economic circumstances.²¹⁶ His first slave was gifted to him by his father. He was gifted a few more when he married his wife. Other slaves were purchased. They were acquired by the destroying the family unit because he never purchased an entire family or a married couple.²¹⁷ As such, in order for the Cohoon slaves to create kinship networks similar to Good Hope and Stirling, they had to have created them for themselves.²¹⁸

The dynamics of the Cohoon slave families differed in formation than those of Good Hope and Stirling. Cohoon slave kin networks and settled immediate families took some time to develop.²¹⁹ The Cohoon slave families were formed as a direct result of the owner's desire to build a labor force to move his status from farmer to planter.²²⁰ As such, Cohoon made business decisions that directly affected the kin networks of his slaves. Many of his slave women were allowed to marry men from other plantations so the children of their union would belong to him.²²¹ In addition, in accordance with slave beliefs, probably derived from African cultural standards, the women on his plantation

²¹⁴ Ibid, 124.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 124.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 129.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 129.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 124.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 134.

²²⁰ Ibid, 131.

²²¹ Ibid, 131.

would not have mated with the men there because they were already related by blood.²²²

Nearly all of the men on Cohoon's plantation born between 1815 and 1824 had blood ties to the women born in those same years. There were no men eligible to be the women's mates.²²³ The marriages he allowed with men off the plantation contributed to the survival of the family unit in most cases.²²⁴

Marriages between spouses who lived on other farms and plantations posed a number of difficulties for them and their families. However, it developed some positive familial traits for the African-American family.²²⁵ When the male husband and father was away from his family, the other family members who lived on the wife's plantation assumed roles or stepped in where they could to help the wife and children. Thus, families on the husband's plantation would step in and help him with things such as providing meals or a place to stay while he was away from the wife.²²⁶ According to researcher Niara Sudarkasa, the extended family network was the norm in African family structures.²²⁷ In indigenous African societies, certain related family members resided together in compounds or cluster of houses.²²⁸ In addition, the absence of the husband or father did not mean the home was unstable. Other adult males such as uncles, brothers, grandfathers, or cousins assumed the male support role in the family.²²⁹ Gutman ascertains that the kin-related household, prior to and after reconstruction, was the

²²² Ibid, 131.

²²³ Ibid, 131.

²²⁴ Ibid, 131.

²²⁵ Ibid, 137.

²²⁶ Ibid, 137.

²²⁷ Niara Sudarkasa, "African American Female Headed Households: Some Neglected Dimensions," in *Black Families*, 4th edition, Harriette Pipes McAdoo, ed. (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publishing, 2007), 173.

²²⁸ Niara Sudarkasa, "African American Female Headed Households:", 173.

²²⁹ Ibid, 175.

norm.²³⁰ This suggests a possible continuity of kinship network practices among slaves that was a remnant of African familial practices.

After the initial early slave family disruptions to establish himself as a slave owner, Cohoon never broke up an entire family and did not separate a husband and wife by sale. Thus, the slave family was stabilized, even if the spouse lived on a nearby plantation or farm.²³¹ Because of the relationship the slave women and children had to men on neighboring plantations, the family was able to survive. Slaves whose lives had been disrupted by Cohoon's early slave purchases were later allowed to settle into family life as a means to nourish and enlarge his enterprise.²³²

Gutman's research shows Cohoon slaves, following stabilization, developed their own community that demonstrated beliefs and behaviors that were similar to those of the Good Hope and Stirling slaves. The median age of the mother at first birth was 18. Marriages lasted for long periods, lasting between 13 and 23 years. Fewer children were born in this community prior to the parent's marriage than in the Good Hope and Stirling community.²³³ Nearly nine in ten children grew up in conventional households.²³⁴

Gutman notes that it is important to recognize that the morals and values of the Good Hope slaves were similar to those of slaves over the entire South regardless of differences in their enslavement.²³⁵ Even though there were different external factors that affected the beliefs and behaviors of the slaves (such as the owners), many of the cultural

²³⁰ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (New York, Vintage Books, 1976), 212-213.

²³¹ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*., 131.

²³² Ibid, 132.

²³³ Ibid, 124.

²³⁴ Ibid, 124.

²³⁵ Ibid, 101.

practices and beliefs of the slave families were the same across plantations.²³⁶ They all had similar kin networks, marital rules, naming practices, sexual behavior, and domestic arrangements.²³⁷ They made similar choices and lived in communities shaped by common morals, which directs attention to the cultural and social determinants of behavior instead of behavior by force.²³⁸

Family scholar and black family researcher Robert Staples and his collaborator Leonor Johnson noted in their study that the basis of the African family life was the kinship group, which connected members by blood ties and the common interests and needs for the function of the entire family.²³⁹ The behavior of individual members was regulated by legal codes and court systems in each village that ensured family roles were identified, and the family functioned as a humanitarian and mutual aid participant in the community.²⁴⁰ The structure and the function of the African and the African-American family in slavery underwent a radical change. However, the importance of the family to the African slaves and their descendants in America did not change.²⁴¹ Staple and Johnson noted that even though marriage and family patterns were no longer under the control of the kinship group, the family was able to endure in spite of the destructive forces it faced in American slave society.²⁴² This information is aligned with Gutman's premise that the African tradition of family, regardless of the owner's possible force of

²³⁶ Ibid, 102.

²³⁷ Ibid, 102.

²³⁸ Ibid, 102.

²³⁹ Leonor Boulin Johnson, Robert Stables, *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1993), 1.

²⁴⁰ Johnson, Stables, *Black Families at the Crossroads*., 1-2.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 3.

²⁴² Ibid, 3.

family, was a prominent force in the existence of kinship among African-American slaves.²⁴³ Gutman notes that African beliefs and practices were not totally discarded.²⁴⁴ Kin networks among the slaves were developed and persisted regardless of boundaries set by slave owners.²⁴⁵

Gutman notes that just like the slaves, the emancipated slaves and the early twentieth century southern black migrants all had the capacity to adapt. He does not challenge the harshness of slavery nor does he negate that the results of slavery did not cause some psychological effect on the descendants of slaves.²⁴⁶ However, from the records he analyzed of black families over 175 years, there is no evidence that the black family crumbled as a result of slavery, nor did Gutman suggest that a pathological culture of poverty contributed to the weakening of the black family headed by women.²⁴⁷ Even more so, Gutman mentions the period of significant increase in black family break-ups was between 1950 and 1970. However, the breakdown of the family had little connection to Moynihan's tangle of pathology rooted in the structural make up or weakness of the black family. It was directly correlated to the response poor unemployed migrant black workers had to urban unemployment.²⁴⁸ What assisted in the survival of those families

²⁴³ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (New York, Vintage Books, 1976), 212.

²⁴⁴ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*., 331.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 135.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 465.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 465.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 468.

affected by the break up was extensive kin networks and friends who devised ways of dealing with severe deprivation by creating elastic household boundaries.²⁴⁹

Critics of Moynihan, such as Frank Furstenberg, concluded that his report did not consider working-class and middle-class black families²⁵⁰ or the factors that contributed to the success of those classes. In the 1950s, family experts noted that the family formation, which had adapted to the decline of the agricultural era and the rise of the industrial era, was well equipped for and suited to provide the socialization and support for the next generation.²⁵¹ That family form was the nuclear family in which the father was the leader who protected his family from the outside world and connected his children to the economic system. The mother was the expressive leader who protects the father from economic pressures and manages the home.²⁵² This family model is predicated on marriage and as such researchers of the 1950s deemed the model flexible enough to respond to new economic opportunities and was geographically mobile.²⁵³ Furstenberg notes that Moynihan was undoubtedly influenced by the scholars of the 1950s. As such, Moynihan used this cultural template at scale in his study of the dysfunction of the black family.²⁵⁴ Thus, he did not consider assessing the black family according to cultural differences and how they intersect with economic conditions.

²⁴⁹ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (New York, Vintage Books, 1976), 468.

²⁵⁰ Frank Furstenberg, "If Moynihan Had Only Known: Race, Class, and Family Change in the Late Twentieth Century," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 94.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 96-97.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Furstenburg ascertains that Moynihan's study on the black family was historically rooted in the era in which he wrote it.²⁵⁵

Moynihan noted that the characteristics of the black family (most notably female-headed households) weakened the position of black men and boys.²⁵⁶ He did in fact state that the situation of lower-class black families was because of the cultural legacy of slavery and discrimination. What he did not suggest was that the family was still enduring the effects of racism and that the catalyst for black family formation was the economic conditions that the black family was still navigating.²⁵⁷ Furstenburg states that the black family is vulnerable and that that vulnerability is due more to economic circumstances than to its disadvantaged historical circumstances or the family's makeup or formation.²⁵⁸

Moynihan's report did not consider the various ways the black family was arranged or other ways to analyze family units. Moynihan looked at the poor black family system through a lens that considered any family that did not have a two-parent household as pathological and unstable.²⁵⁹ He never considered that a single parent household could have the same issues as a two-parent household or that the makeup of the black family included a family support system that worked for them.²⁶⁰ Furthermore, he did not consider black children from a single-parent household as normal and socially

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 107.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 97.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 108.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Herbert Gans, "The Moynihan Report and its Aftermaths: A Critical Analysis," *Du Bois Review* 8, no. 2 (2011): 318.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 318.

acceptable, but instead viewed them through a white mainstream lens that deemed them as unacceptable or pathological misfits.²⁶¹

According to researchers Alan Berger and William Simon, though Moynihan's report generalized the issues in the black community, it did not fully examine the effects of race and the role that racism played in containing blacks and perpetuating poverty in black communities.²⁶² Sociologist Herbert Gans notes that Moynihan's report was intended to investigate the ties between black male unemployment and the black family. Instead, the report devoted most of its attention to high rates of single-parent, female-headed households living in poverty as the barrier to the obtainment of employment and economic success.²⁶³ Berger and Simon stated that the study measured the pathology (the deviation of the black family from the norm) instead of concentrating on what was causing the tangle (the economic and political systems causing the deviation).²⁶⁴ Berger and Simon quote Moynihan's study:

Not every instance of social pathology afflicting the Negro community can be traced to the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed it will be found to be the principle source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation".²⁶⁵ It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people. Although that will has reasserted itself in our time, it is a resurgence that is doomed to frustration unless the viability of the Negro family is restored.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ Ibid., 319.

²⁶² Berger and Simon, "Black Families and the Moynihan Report," 146.

²⁶³ Gans, "The Moynihan Report," 315.

²⁶⁴ Berger and Simon, "Black Families and the Moynihan Report," 146.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 147.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

Moynihan purports that the behavior of poor black people, which contributed to the issues of the black family, is the result of slavery. The behavior of lower-class blacks is due to the family's poverty condition.²⁶⁷ The report concluded that the plight and social position of the black family are largely predicated on the family members' devotion to change their behaviors so that the next generation is not subjected to poverty. This suggests that there are no political or economic factors affecting the outcome.²⁶⁸ This premise is substantiated by Moynihan's urging of the black community to pull itself up by its familial bootstraps.²⁶⁹ He was blind to the effects of socioeconomic factors on family structure.²⁷⁰

Writer Kay Hymowitz studied the report as well. Hymowitz summarizes its results, which examined the condition of the black family after desegregation. Her study makes mention of Andrew Billingsley's statement that Moynihan made a special point of omitting 75% of black middle-class families from his report.²⁷¹ Had he looked at black family characteristic from a different perspective he may have found that black families are adaptive, absorbing, and resilient.²⁷² She strongly emphasizes the report's suggestion that reform programs geared specifically toward families and marriage are necessary. She reminds the reader that though the report may not have considered some factors, it was concerned with the fact that the rate of black male unemployment was not

²⁶⁷ Berger and Simon, "Black Families and the Moynihan Report," 147.

²⁶⁸ Marcia Carlson and Mary Corcoran, "Family Structure and Children's Behavior and Cognitive Outcomes," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, no. 3 (2001): 876.

²⁶⁹ Gans, "The Moynihan Report," 316.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁷¹ Kay Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 59.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 59.

proportionate to that of whites and that specific policies and initiatives were necessary.²⁷³

She notes a statement from the report that black women headed many households in northern cities and that fifteen years after the report child poverty among black communities was on the rise.²⁷⁴ Though Hymowitz in part supports the premise of Moynihan, it also suggests that black families themselves are not the source of the pathology.

Law professor Anita Hill, in her study on equality and the discourses needed to help black Americans feel at home in America, notes that when Moynihan took aim at poor black families, he absolutely based his theory on his comparison of the black family to nuclear suburban white families.²⁷⁵ He suggested that black families emulate white suburban families, and thus the assumption by policymakers was that the main solution for the problems of black families would be to have their households headed by men who had jobs.²⁷⁶ Hymowitz in her study notes that this proved to be false.²⁷⁷ Before Moynihan completed his study, black men began to slowly enter or re-enter the workforce. But women on welfare continued to climb.²⁷⁸ This is why Moynihan created the notion of a destructive ghetto culture sparked by the single-parent, female-headed household.²⁷⁹ According to Hill, Moynihan proposed a policy that would provide training and employment for the male if he decided to marry and take care of his

²⁷³ Ibid., 53.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 62–63.

²⁷⁵ Anita Hill, *Reimagining Equality: Stories of Gender, Race, and Finding Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 67.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 67.

²⁷⁷ Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste*, 53.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 53.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

children. The woman would have to agree to give up welfare or stop working to stay at home and raise the children.²⁸⁰ His theory was this policy would save America from a welfare system that was expanding while also saving the black family from a tangle of pathology.²⁸¹ His plan did not consider unmarried mothers or help single women who took care of their family members. His plan did not consider black women much at all.²⁸²

The key phrase in Moynihan's noted report on the Negro family is "tangle of pathology": unemployment, female-headed households, and illegitimacy contributing to generational cycles of antisocial behavior among black people.²⁸³ His report on pathology concluded that unless things change in the way the black family was structured it would fail.²⁸⁴ Scholars note that structure has very little to do with the perpetuation of antisocial behavior. A study conducted by Berger and Simon tested this conclusion by studying several questions: Was the rate of antisocial behavior higher than that of whites in the same socioeconomic level and was the instability of black families the sole contributor to broken homes? The researchers looked at antisocial behavior as a result of the perpetuation of deprivation and poverty. They analyzed the impact of parents, as well as the perception that children have of parents, and the educational aspirations of children in broken homes. In addition, they investigated the development of egalitarian patterns in family behavior among black families. They found that no "tangle of pathology" was apparent. White working-class males from broken homes had a higher rate of

²⁸⁰ Hill, *Reimagining Equality*, 67.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁸³ Berger and Simon, "Black Families and the Moynihan Report," 147.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

delinquency than black working-class males.²⁸⁵ Young black males from broken middle-class families were as violent as black males from broken lower-class families. Both groups were no more antisocial than whites from similar classes.²⁸⁶ Black children who have close positive relationships with their mothers are less likely to be violent compared to those who have a negative relationship.²⁸⁷

Thriving black families, regardless of structure, actually serve as a barrier against pathologies, especially those originating in the street.²⁸⁸ Black children, regardless of the educational attainment of the parents and their academic success or abilities, still aspired to attend college in an attempt to better themselves.²⁸⁹ The intactness of the family had no bearing on their views of education. The broken family, though it may have some effect, is not the primary factor in the underachievement or delinquency of black low-income children.²⁹⁰

Other scholars (e.g., Tom Burrell, Robert Franklin, and Mark Anthony Neal) agree with one premise from Moynihan—that the breakdown of black marriages and, essentially, the breakdown of the black family is a consequence of the willful dissolution of the black family during slavery. Burrell, in his book *Brainwashed*, states that in order for white slave owners to build an enterprise based on human chattel, the family had to be destroyed beginning with the annihilation of the head of the black household, the black man. The black man had to be broken down so that he would not be willing to cause

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 151.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 152.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 152.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 153–154.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 160.

harm by revolting against the economically successful slave system. The man was the first to become powerless to protect his loved ones from the assaults of the master.²⁹¹ Enslaved women were unable to exercise their wants or needs freely as a wife or mother. The volatile environment rendered almost everyone helpless. Both men and women operated in fear of being murdered if they attempted to save each other or save the lives of their children. Centuries of forced observation, trauma, and subjection to abuse contributed to the demise of the black community. Franklin observed in his study of the black community that though there is evidence that the black family unit survived, and some even thrived during their enslavement, the peculiar institution of slavery laid the groundwork for the emotional detachment, abandonment, debasement, and violence that African-Americans now inflict upon each other.²⁹² Black people live with the perpetuation of these dynamics and, as such, the black family is weakened.

Mark Anthony Neal, in his book *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post Soul Aesthetic*, finds—just as the scholars previously discussed have—that the report’s suggestion that the absence of the father in the black family, combined with the semi-stable position of black women in the workforce, family, and community, situates the black family in crisis. All this occurs in a society that assumes that the man should provide leadership in the home and the community. The prominence of black women in community institutions, including the black family, undermines the place presumed to be

²⁹¹ Tom Burrell, *Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority* (New York: Smiley Books, 2010), 21.

²⁹² Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 43, 62.

reserved for the black father.²⁹³ Though there were others who came to this conclusion before the report (e.g., E. Franklin Frazier) Moynihan's report received more visibility.²⁹⁴

At the time of the report, low-income families were generally thought to be one-parent households.²⁹⁵ This information caused many to believe that most black families were matriarchies. In the 1970s, scholar Delores Mack conducted a study on black families and the primary decision-maker in the family. She studied black and white families from different social classes and found that black working-class women perceive themselves as the more dominant in the marriage. In middle-class black families the roles were closer to being equal; depending on the situation, neither was dominant. In all couples surveyed, though, social class differences outweighed racial differences in determining dominance among the respondents.²⁹⁶

Moynihan theorizes about the roles that black women play in the family, and it is doubtful that he considered the flexibility of family roles in black families. A study of the black middle-class offered some insight into family roles. Charles Willie notes that middle-class black husbands and wives act as partners when necessary and have developed a pattern where neither is dominant.²⁹⁷ His study also found that in lower-class black families the husband and wife roles are grounded in cooperation for survival; even though the husband may dominate the relationship, the couple takes on an

²⁹³ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 61.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Greenblatt and Willie, "Four Classic Studies," 692.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 693.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

egalitarian characteristic.²⁹⁸ Husbands and wives have assigned roles, but both understand that these roles may change depending upon the situation.²⁹⁹

Researcher Warren TenHouten found in black married couples from various classes in the 1970s that black men had the dominant role; the families were not demonstrably matriarchal.³⁰⁰ In fact, lower class black males' role scores showed they were more dominant than lower-class white males.³⁰¹ Men from lower social classes scored higher for dominance than those from higher classes.³⁰² Black families showed the highest ideology for male dominance in the family.³⁰³ Class did not dictate whether mothers were dominant,³⁰⁴ in contrast to Moynihan's assessment. The report stated, however, that fathers in low-income black families had more power than any other class of fathers studied. Just as TenHouten negates this premise, future studies should lead scholars to challenge other matters identified by the report as a social calamity among blacks.

Because Moynihan was a northerner of Irish descent and grew up in New York City,³⁰⁵ Hymowitz surmises that he was familiar with the self-destructive environment of European immigrant ghettos and may have related the black environment to it. She believes he felt that, for blacks, this destruction was worse because their families were significantly affected by the absence of men. Families are the main place for shaping

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Warren TenHouten, "The Black Family: Myth and Reality," *Psychiatry* 33, no. 2 (1970): 170.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ James Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 1.

character and developing social attributes of children; an absent man cannot contribute to a child's character or social awareness. What an absent man might contribute would be undeveloped or underdeveloped.³⁰⁶

The lack of a father or father figure in the household does disrupt the home environment and may contribute to low educational achievement, lack of care, unlawful behavior, and unemployment.³⁰⁷ Hymowitz adds some insight into Moynihan's critique of the matrifocal household and concludes that it was detrimental to the child.³⁰⁸ She states that he suggested that when children have the opportunity to observe a loving marriage of their parents, they could learn how to work through issues with their future spouses. Hymowitz reminds readers that Moynihan, though often criticized, did offer some solutions for correcting family issues. One solution was to strengthen the family through marriage. Moynihan concludes that marriage provides a stable home and gives the children the opportunity to learn virtues. Marriage affords better opportunities for men and women committed to each other to secure a stable future and have plans for survival. It offers the basis for a family environment that is more conducive for earning and saving money and for being devoted to advancing their children's prospects.³⁰⁹ In addition to marriage, families should have or find more options for raising successful children, and thereby turn around the condition of lower socioeconomic black families. Overall, Hymowitz and the others mentioned above, support Moynihan's proposition that

³⁰⁶ Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste*, 54.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 54–55.

in order to make gallant strides toward solving the problems of African-Americans the black family structure needs addressing.

Harriett Pipes McAdoo, black family scholar and opponent of the tenets of Moynihan, in her landmark study on the black family reveals that Moynihan faced many who opposed his report. His report was often used to validate the suppression of African-Americans, but it also became the reference point for implementing a plethora of policies and programs the purpose of which was to fix the African-American community.³¹⁰ Still, many felt his work omitted some factors that should have been included in the discourse with regard to issues within black families, especially when his report suggested that to fix the black community one would have to fix the black family.³¹¹ Scholars and policymakers took exception to his report's focus on what was wrong with the family rather than what potential exists to address the problem.³¹² Although Moynihan cited Frazier's early work on the Negro family and credited him with some of his findings, some black community leaders and scholars were appalled. They were unwilling to outwardly accept or consider his prediction that future generations of black children in America would be unable to seize the opportunities that the Civil Rights Movement had fought to provide.³¹³ Moynihan places the blame for the destruction of the black community on several factors specific to black life, and he specifically placed the blame for the destruction of the black community solely on the black family.³¹⁴

³¹⁰ McAdoo, *Black Families*, 56.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56, 57.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

³¹⁴ McAdoo, *Black Families*, 55-56.

Some black leaders worked instead to divert blame specifically to a lack of jobs and discrimination. Hymowitz conveys that the focus of the fight did change. More effort to help a black man stay with and strengthen his family might have been possible. Instead, some black leaders suggested by their actions, or lack thereof, that a matrifocal black family was acceptable and that the cyclical nature of this factor did not need fixing by the American power structure. Hymowitz states that as a show of support for their communities, some leaders congratulated single black mothers for doing a great job raising their children alone.³¹⁵ This is not to say that black women who have had to raise and support their families alone have not done a miraculous task. However, black leaders accepted this family structure at that time without considering the ramifications. This factor may have contributed to the future emasculation and devaluation of black men, the physical, emotional, and spiritual destruction of black women, and become a developmental impediment to black children.

Researcher and historian James Patterson looked at how black families fared since publication of the *Moynihan Report*. He notes that Moynihan's report revealed that it was the American political, economic, and social systems, as well as individuals, that were responsible for destroying black families.³¹⁶ Patterson found that Moynihan's solution implied an emphasis on the need for economic development in black communities, with particular focus on black men, and that federal assistance be structured

³¹⁵ Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste*, 7, 57.

³¹⁶ Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough*, 49.

and allocated in a way that did not disrupt family structures.³¹⁷ He proposed that in order to rebuild black communities, reconstruction of the family must be at the forefront.³¹⁸

Research that followed publication of Moynihan's work revealed that scholars seemed to agree with the aforementioned suggestion of his report. How this feat was to be accomplished depended on how family in the black community was defined and gauged. As mentioned earlier, positive depictions of what love, marriage, and family look like in the black community may be difficult to ascertain because household goals often have priority over family interaction. This may hinder the appearance of what one may believe to be love in a family. The desire to reconstruct strong black families could waver before its importance was fully understood, in that examples of loving relationships may not presently be evident. What Moynihan deemed to be pathology, predicated on the makeup of the black family, was in fact not. The black family has a different composition and culture, which Moynihan failed to take into account. Scholars must look at what truly hinders the positive formation and success of the black family, identify dynamics that work, and gauge the black family through an appropriate lens.

Black Families: Successful Characteristics

According to social theorist and scholar bell hooks love between black men and women, efforts to create meaningful and lasting personal relationships, and social changes grounded in a love ethic are crucial to healing the wounds left by slavery and

³¹⁷ Ibid., 44, 53, 58, 61, 62.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

constant exposure to racial oppression.³¹⁹ Black people should have the opportunity to better understand and recognize that their historical experiences surrounding marriage and family are not the same as traditional white families. Their environment can affect the way they choose to operate in the larger white society while also trying to assimilate to white social norms.

hooks surmises that society—including the dominant American culture and African-American culture—does not seem to embrace willingly the possibility that systemic racism has affected black male/female intimate relationships and, ultimately, the black family. Success in relationships hinges on the need to understand that in spite of sexist mainstream norms, cultural understanding and solidarity are imperative to survival.³²⁰ Pipes and McAdoo support this premise and state that the African-American family has historically been an institution that protects the individual from inescapable white racism and provides the support system that family members need.³²¹

hooks further argues that there has been a rupture in black solidarity, which evolved from patriarchal thinking founded on Eurocentric and sexist norms.³²² Black people have social constructs that the dominant culture and most minority societies other than African-Americans do not encounter.³²³ Those matters affect how black people have relationships and how those relationships survive successfully.

³¹⁹ hooks, *Salvation*, xxiv.

³²⁰ hooks, *Salvation*, 161.

³²¹ McAdoo, *Black Families*, 74.

³²² hooks, *Salvation*, 166.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 185.

hooks finds that mutually fulfilling love relationships are a result of people loving and seeing each other as equals. Spiritual and emotional growth should be encouraged. A successful love relationship in mainstream America implies that normal family life is the same across the board regardless of race. For a family to be normal suggests that there is no divorce or violence affecting the lives of family members, but only evidence of love, constant encouragement, growth, and understanding.³²⁴ Successful family and love relationships in the African-American community may look different. This difference does not necessarily mean that the family is weak. It is to say that the black family may require a different lens with which to assess it.

Noted cultural scholar Robert Staples suggests that the black family is not a system characterized by male-female relationships in which the majority of its couples are married with the majority of their children born in wedlock.³²⁵ There are distinctly different experiences that have shaped the black family. The most significant experience affecting the African-American is slavery. The enslaved were forced to eliminate remnants of their African cultural heritage. As Frazier notes, the African family system ended with little or no chance of reknitting ties with kinfolks and associates.³²⁶ Robert Staples and Leonor Johnson studied the black family and found that family structure and function conformed to the effects of enslavement. The political, cultural, and economic

³²⁴ Ibid., 166–167.

³²⁵ Robert Staples, *The Black Family: Essays and Studies* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), vii.

³²⁶ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1957), 11–12.

changes left a permanent mark on its assembly.³²⁷ The role of the father in the enslaved community (when there was a father for the family) was relegated to adding to the family's rations of food or making furniture for the home as he could not perform the traditional role of an American father. The Negro father could not protect his family from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse by the slave owner.³²⁸ In turn, the black woman became the center of the family, as she was often required to use her body, unwillingly, as a commodity to pay for protecting her family. Whatever authority the slave master allowed, the enslaved family was given to the mother burdening her with the dual role of laborer and caretaker.³²⁹

Emancipation saw black families migrating north and west. Families faced oppression by Jim Crow laws and segregation, subjection to more physical, mental, and emotional vulnerability, and impromptu disruption due caused by the traumatizing experiences of the community. This trauma included incarceration without cause, lynching, burned housing, and more, violence that still occurs today on a smaller scale. Life in northern cities reduced the function of family and contributed to losing extended family supports.³³⁰ This has left an indelible mark on black family structure that is different from that of white families. Walter Allen and Angela James note that it is important that black family experiences be seen through a lens using characteristics that

³²⁷ Leonor Johnson and Robert Staples, *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), xi.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

³²⁹ Johnson and Staples, *Black Families*, 15.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

explicitly contributed to African-Americans.³³¹ The content of media portraying the black family should use characteristics unique to African-American family individualities and be studied in the context of black families and not white ones, as there are distinct differences.

In a study on marital instability among non-whites, Greta Miao describes factors that contribute to the perception of the weakening of the black family. As far as social norms are concerned, the perception is more frequent when viewed from a Eurocentric perspective. During the rise in use of birth control pills and other contraceptive advances, pregnancy became more of an option and menstrual cycles were often controlled. Pregnancy, as a reason to marry, became moot. Cohabiting and raising children outside of marriage, a subject that was once taboo in the Eurocentric lens, became acceptable. Miao also notes governmental assistance programs also contributed to the demise of marriages. Welfare programs actively encouraged the break-up of families and marriages of poor people because the amount of aid was directly related to the income and marital status of the mother.³³² The less an unwed mother makes in relation to the number of children she has, the more she can get in aid. Regardless of the definition of families, or what paradigm shifts occur in familial relationships, the institution of family is important to the lives of people—specifically to the lives of black people. This study looks at the portrayal of family in the African-American community, the institution of marriage within the black community, and why it is important to investigate these topics. This is

³³¹ Allen and James, “Comparative Perspectives,” 2.

³³² Greta Miao, “Marital Instability and Unemployment Among Whites and Nonwhites: The Moynihan Report Revisited—Again,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 36, no. 1 (1974): 84.

not to say that in order to have a viable family in the African-American community one must be married. Rather, to be married in America has its rewards and can be beneficial in creating a strong African-American family.

In his study on marriage, Steve Nock found that its practice in the African-American community has changed. The period of enslavement prevented legal marriages for hundreds of years. Since then, a traditional, legally binding marriage indicated a church or civil ceremony complete with a witness to the marriage contract. Once considered a lifelong contract, changes in demographics and the social institutions of the United States over the past several decades have disrupted traditional marriage and family patterns.³³³ The appearance of family for mainstream Americans is changing as well. People are postponing marriage, couples are cohabitating more often, more children are being born to one-parent households, and more women than men are in the workforce. These factors reduce the need for a woman to depend on a man for income or the need to function (or remain) in a two-parent household.

Nock states that the institution of marriage is important to the success of the family, though it may not be necessary for a thriving family.³³⁴ Aside from loving companionship and support, marriage was an arrangement that garnered responsibility from the parents for the children. Significant changes in attitudes about marriage shifted following the introduction of birth control to society.³³⁵ As attitudes about marriage changed, so did attitudes about sex. Prior to the availability of birth control, sex was

³³³ Steven L. Nock, "Marriage as a Public Issue," *Marriage and Child Wellbeing* 15, no. 2 (2005): 14.

³³⁴ Nock, "Marriage as a Public Issue," 28.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

restricted to marriage and as such communities were able to reduce the number of illegitimate children.³³⁶ Establishing paternity was important to legitimize the child, ensure they had rights to inheritances, and prevent the stigmatization of the mother.³³⁷ After birth control's introduction to society, more and more questions of legitimacy and paternity became negligible.³³⁸

Marriage has distinct benefits for couples that assist a family in thriving, according to Nock. Married people live longer, are generally healthier, earn more money, accumulate more wealth, have better sex lives, and are happier overall.³³⁹ Suicide, chronic illnesses, depression, and addictions to controlled substances are minimal for married people.³⁴⁰ Additional advantages to being married are the preference of employers to hire married people and often reward married workers more handsomely; premiums for health, life, and automotive insurance are lower; laws give married couples legal rights not available to cohabitating partners; and marriage sends positive economic signals that are culturally associated with the value of an individual.³⁴¹

The marital relationship provides legal, conventional, and moral assumptions about what is proper behavior. Married couples create, and have at their disposal, a treasure trove of resources to assist them in solving household and family problems that unmarried people do not have. Partners that fully participate in the marriage are able to confront issues by simply being in the marriage. This encourages partners to seek

³³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid., 16.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 17.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 18–19.

solutions to issues rather than leave the spouse and break up the family. Marriage is a contract that is not easily broken, whether physically, mentally, spiritually, or legally. Nock confirms that marriage is an institution that defines a set of social norms for the family and aligns with other community institutions such as politics, economics, and education.³⁴²

The fact that a person is married signals to financial entities that economic risk may be acceptable because a married person is synonymous with stability, maturity, and commitment.³⁴³ Finances are often associated with family stability and success. Marriage is also beneficial to the African-American family. The benefits of being married can change individuals who view married couples differently, and the views of others affect how people see themselves.³⁴⁴ Married couples can have better self-esteem than unmarried ones. Furthermore, Nock states that marriage provides social benefits for both spouses, but more so for the man. Prior to marriage, single men are more apt to live less healthy lives than do unmarried women. Once married, men often adopt the lifestyle of the woman and make better lifestyle choices. Married men are often more comfortable than unmarried men because there is the assumption of shared responsibilities and a support system already in place.³⁴⁵

Despite the many positive aspects of marriage, marriage itself has been on the decline. It has most significantly decreased in the black community. African-American rates of marriage from 1950 to 2010 have barely increased, while the population of

³⁴² Nock, "Marriage as a Public Issue," 16–18.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

African-Americans has significantly increased. The 1950 census indicated 11 million black adults in America, 7 million (64%) of whom were married. Unfortunately, as the black American population grew, marriage rates began to decline. In 1980, of the 18 million black adults in America, just 44% were married. In the year 2000, with 26 million black adults in America, 38% were married. By 2010, of the 29 million black adults in America, just 37% were married.³⁴⁶ Conversely, in the 1950s, 66% of the white population was married; in 2010, approximately 56% of all white adults were married.³⁴⁷ Though a decline of marriage is evident, the drop in the African-American community is more precipitous and significantly inconsistent with population growth.

Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, surmises that although marriage is not necessary today to have a successful, economically viable family, a generationally sustaining family is usually preferred by black women and has been proven to help the family unit.³⁴⁸ bell hooks concluded in her work, *Salvation*, that unfortunately, there have not been a many studies on the formation and sustainability of the emotional relationship between black heterosexual partners and what factors influence it.³⁴⁹ Marriage in the African-American community is declining, which is affecting the ability of the family to succeed. There is a paucity of studies on historic factors (documentation, lore, etc.) regarding the black family. However, a pattern of

³⁴⁶ US Census Bureau, *Marital Status of the Population 15 Years Old and Over, by Sex and Race: 1950 to Present*, accessed April 1, 2011, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Patricia Hills Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 61.

³⁴⁹ hooks, *Salvation*, 169.

studies that favors investigating what does not work when studying the African-American family is prevalent.

The *Moynihan Report* suggested some ways to help the underclass. However, with attention focused on the Vietnam War, the need for social programs was not a high priority. Resources that could have built up the family were instead redirected to the war. When celebrated conservatives studied underclass pathologies they determined that welfare programs contributed to a rise in the underclass and thus needed to be dismantled.³⁵⁰ Media scholar Bradford Martin notes an analysis conducted by political scientist Charles Murray, a conservative, who said that federal policies awarded failure, promiscuity, and dependency in part due to lenient attitudes toward criminal punishment.³⁵¹ The article he wrote in the *National Review* questioned the self-discipline of the underclass and suggested the way to resolve the issues was with more prisons and social controls.³⁵² Liberals, such as distinguished sociologist William Julius Wilson, thought differently. He held public policies and systems, urban deindustrialization, the flight of the black middle-class from urban areas, unemployment, the underclass's lack of position to benefit from affirmative action, and the lack of social and economic equality accountable.³⁵³

For the African-American family, exposure to a majority culture, minority status, and a black cultural identity within the mainstream environment created a triple

³⁵⁰ Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 120.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

quandary. The degree of negotiation and acculturation a black family must embark upon between these three environments profoundly influenced the degree of success it had as defined by the mainstream and its relationship to it.³⁵⁴ A family's level of adjustment to its status in mainstream society and its own identity and mental unassailability³⁵⁵ dictate its success. As African-American families are exposed to societal influences the need to examine how families adapt,³⁵⁶ and what some of those systems of influences might be, becomes more important.

The Rise in Television

As we consider the notion of family, we should also consider what outside influences affect it. Coyne et al. conducted a study on media and family functioning. Among their findings was that one of the most influential tools used to sway people to think and act differently was television.³⁵⁷ There is a relationship between television and family function; television has had a massive impact on American daily life and has caused a shift in cultural attitudes.³⁵⁸ David Joselit's study on television as art found that television could foster a specific form of spectatorship because it creates multiple identifications, reflects viewers' experiences, and re-channels them into a limited number

³⁵⁴ Cheryl Evans and G. Susan Mosely-Howard, "Relationships and Contemporary Experiences of the African American Family: An Ethnographic Case Study," *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 431.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 434.

³⁵⁷ Sarah Coyne, Randall Day, Gilbert Fellingham, Camila Hodge, Neil Lundberg, Laura Padilla-Walker, and Ramon Zabriskie, "The Relationship Between Media in the Home and Family Functioning In Context of Leisure," *Journal of Leisure Research* 44, no. 3 (2012): 288.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

of moralized and conventional narratives.³⁵⁹ The gap between the viewer's reflection and her reality allows ideologies to take form.³⁶⁰

Joselit states that the NAACP, in one of its many quests for increased positive black presence on television, found that television representation of blacks was crucial to politics and political activism.³⁶¹ In the 1980s, a change in television viewing demographics occurred, which led to an increase in black actors on network television shows. As white viewers migrated to cable television, black viewers needed to be appeased.³⁶² Many major network shows in the 1980s employed the strategy of narrow casting (i.e., consciously framing programs to define specific ethnic and socioeconomic audiences). Network executives began to understand that they could increase their profits by soliciting idealized connections and identifications between viewers and fictional characters.³⁶³ However, the significant growth of black depictions on television began in the 1970s with depictions of black families.

The depiction of black families on television in the 1970s typically represented what white, liberal, middle-class writers and programmers assumed black families experienced. They were struggling families who relied on public assistance programs, had difficulty retaining employment, and functioned as single parent households.³⁶⁴ As art often imitates life, or can take on the spirit of society at a given time, television in the 1980s evoked different opinions about African-Americans. Whereas shows in the 1970s

³⁵⁹ David Joselit, "The Video Public Sphere," *Art Journal* 59, no. 2 (2000): 47.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² David Joselit, "The Video Public Sphere," 48.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 77.

highlighted black families and their socioeconomic issues, shows in the 1980s took another direction.

Media scholar Crystal Zook states that following the 1960s and 1970s, black television underwent some significant changes. Black television had been granted some liberties in the era of affirmative action and integration, which assisted blacks in gaining some economic mobility.³⁶⁵ These achievements created more inclusion, and notions about race became blurred in that they were rarely discussed in storylines.³⁶⁶ The 1980s ushered in shows with black characters who were appealing to mainstream audiences. Zook states that the challenge of *The Cosby Show* and others like it was their authenticity. They worked to separate poverty from its perceived relationship to blackness. Shows that followed in the 1990s would face the representational struggle that social theorists of the time failed to see.³⁶⁷

Media theorist Darrell Hunt states that a number of studies conducted by the US Commission on Civil Rights revealed that in the late 1970s there was a significant absence of blacks working behind the camera. This absence was directly related to black representation on television.³⁶⁸ Diversity issues in America were another contributing factor. This political pattern, pertaining to the industry's issues with diversity, is longstanding.³⁶⁹ The pattern begins with periodic release and circulation of offensive or insensitive material, followed by public outrage about the material. There is then

³⁶⁵ Zook, *Color by FOX*, 2.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.

³⁶⁸ Darnell Hunt, "Black Content, White Control," in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Darnell Hunt, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 268.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

typically a release of statistical data about minority exclusion or lack of diversity, and then the industry responds by placing a symbolic initiative in place to appease the critics. Once the matter loses some of its vigor, the industry goes back to business as usual.³⁷⁰

Media scholar Herman Gray argues that attitudes toward black representation on television were formed during television's early years in the 1950s.³⁷¹ Blacks were often in vaudeville, radio, and early television. This introduction of blackness to America helped shape the social and cultural terms in which black representation began to appear in mass media.³⁷² This period shaped and enabled the sporadic adjustments black representation would make as it worked to change public assumptions.³⁷³ Gray states that the 1950s marked the time that viewer's widely compared what they observed about black people on television to other black people. In addition, black people compared themselves to 1950s television representations.³⁷⁴ Television images of the 1980s are no exception.

Scholar Karen Ross quotes social writer and critic Kobena Mercer, who states that the motivation for black filmmakers has been to challenge the stereotypes of black people being seen as victims or problems, or the "other" on the margins of society.³⁷⁵ Media creations do not develop in a vacuum, but are products of their specific time with regard to economic, social, and political issues of the day.³⁷⁶ Just as significant events in history

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 269.

³⁷¹ Gray, *Watching Race*, 74.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 74.

³⁷⁵ Karen Ross, *Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 153.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 88.

are in television representation, so, too, do social issues appear in conscientious television programming that focus on aspects of race.³⁷⁷

The media often portrayed poverty as a metaphor for black people. The Huxtables were a contradiction in terms of expectations from black people.³⁷⁸ Stuart Hall, a noted social theorist, states that the black history of marginalization has led to significant movements of resistance. Members of black culture contest the orthodox images of the other and reconnect under a self-defined and reconstructed black identity to represent themselves in their own images and develop a black aesthetic and communicative codes.³⁷⁹ There must be a way to hear the oppressed voice and to silence the stereotypes in the imaginations of whites.³⁸⁰ The dismantling of black stereotypes, Hall argues, must have two main objectives. Black artists and cultural promoters will need access to the rights of representation, and there must be a counter-position of positive black images against assumptions of marginality and stereotypical images.³⁸¹ *The Cosby Show* and shows like it seemed designed to challenge the status quo.

Ross believes that television shows in the 1980s and 1990s presented fictitious accounts of black people in environments that portrayed life as though it were unaffected by racism and discrimination.³⁸² Ross states that television peddles a depiction of African-Americans as colorblind and class unconscious amid the American myth of good

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Martin, *The Other Eighties*, 120.

³⁷⁹ Ross, *Black and White Media*, 153.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 153–154.

³⁸¹ Ross, *Black and White Media*, 154.

³⁸² Ibid., 116.

work ethic and honest family values.³⁸³ Yet, the fact that blacks appear on television in a positive manner is progress.

Ross notes that the rise in blacks on television parallels desires for prosperity as opposed to social aspirations.³⁸⁴ She notes that the availability of black roles was a function of a black viewing audience having economic influence due to the rise of the black middle class, which was attractive to media advertisers.³⁸⁵ Advertisers conducted research to determine programs for which to purchase time. Historically, media research was largely concerned with the images and messages relayed and how audiences received and perceived information.³⁸⁶ It was done to determine how they functioned as a mechanism for social control. However, in the mid-1990s research interest began to move toward assessing television audiences and to consider what they watched.³⁸⁷ According to Ross, black people were able to penetrate the television industry in the late 1980s because of the illumination of the black community and the industry's recognition that black audiences had purchasing power.³⁸⁸ Thus, the television industry began to make programs to which black people could relate.

Social scholar and critic Gregory Adamo states that a prosperous generation of black people arose in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They had disposable income, were established, and were the new urban demographic for marketers.³⁸⁹ Adamo notes this

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 115.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 115-116.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 87.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 116.

³⁸⁹ Gregory Adamo, *African Americans in Television: Behind the Scenes* (New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 3.

factor in transforming television. FOX television network is noted for using the urban market to build its company.³⁹⁰ FOX was able to implement a television strategy of using black programming to garner a position in the market.³⁹¹ FOX successfully had television show creators cater to black audiences and used writers, directors, and producers who were black to help appeal to audiences.³⁹² These artists were able to use their own reputations to ensure that stories reflected multigenerational realities in the culture.³⁹³ Other networks expanded FOX's strategy to attract black viewers first and white viewers later. The hip-hop culture arose and eventually became the core of popular culture.³⁹⁴ Adamo states that the 1990s were the time for young urban audiences, and the decade ushered in new youthful programming that did not fall into the same categories as primetime shows on the Big Three networks.³⁹⁵ The 1980s made African-Americans visible and the 1990s made them creators, directors, and owners.³⁹⁶

Zook notes the changing landscape of black television in the 1990s, beginning with the significant change in the show lineup at FOX. After a barrage of black shows gave the FOX network the popularity and viewership it desired, it began to replace black shows with more white actors, white directors, and white-produced shows. FOX expanded from six stations to 22 and was able to reach more than 40% of US homes within four years. When it became a contender alongside the Big Three (CBS, NBC, and ABC), FOX had to obtain more white viewers to stay viable. FOX abruptly canceled the

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid., 88.

³⁹³ Ibid., 151.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 5.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

last black shows on its stations.³⁹⁷ Television in the 1990s changed as the result of the rise of new networks, network ownership consolidations, the exclusion of other minority groups, and the rise of more African-American sitcoms. However, these sitcoms were not part of major networks, but were instead on newer, lesser-known network stations.³⁹⁸

Boob Tube or Teaching Tool

Amiso George and Carolyn Orange note in their study on television consumption that children see a great deal of television programming.³⁹⁹ This implies that it is highly plausible that they are learning how to function in relationships based on what they see on television. If the family content available on television is limited or negative, a child learns limited or negative information. Camille Cosby's study on television's influence found that those images could override lessons that have been set and can be the impetus for negative perceptions.⁴⁰⁰ Gurber and Thau note that lessons, which can become values, beliefs, or norms and can follow children into adulthood, can affect the decisions they will make.⁴⁰¹ Those decisions can affect both how they view roles in a family and ultimately the preservation of a family. Cosby stated that the conceptions that black children form about themselves and their world come largely from attitudes that others

³⁹⁷ Crystal Zook, *Color by FOX*, 102.

³⁹⁸ Hunt, "Black Content, White Control," 271.

³⁹⁹ Amiso George and Carolyn Orange, "Child Sacrifice: Black America's Price of Paying the Media Piper," *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 295.

⁴⁰⁰ Camille Cosby, *Television's Imaginable Influences: The Self-Perceptions of Young African-Americans* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 5.

⁴⁰¹ Enid Gruber and Helaine Thau, "Sexually Related Content on Television and Adolescents of Color: Media Theory, Physiological Development, and Psychological Impact," *The Journal of Negro Education* 72, no. 4 (2003): 440.

have about black people.⁴⁰² Noted scholar James Comer surmised that one of the long-standing tools used to perpetuate stereotypical myths about African-Americans was the media.⁴⁰³ Television shows that positively depict black life and social situations can be of significant value to its black viewers.

Bauman, Foshee, and Linder, in their study on social learning, found that people wish to achieve positive results from social experiences without negative consequences.⁴⁰⁴ If one expects or believes a positive outcome is likely, his or her thoughts will be conducive to engaging in positive behavior. If a behavior receives a positive reward, it is more likely to be repeated. Continued exposure to positive behaviors from people serves as motivational engagement with that behavior, as Gruber and Thau note. People who frequently view media are more prone to adopt those beliefs and values and alter their behavior.⁴⁰⁵ As blacks watch more television than any other culture, the content of black-casted shows deserves some analysis.

bell hooks writes that mainstream America has been led to believe that many characteristics attributed to pathological black life are entertaining, given what mainstream media has made available on television for Americans to enjoy.⁴⁰⁶ Today, television influences and supports the perception that no love exists between black people, including love found in family relationships. It is evident that black families are

⁴⁰² Cosby, *Television's Imaginable Influences*, 21.

⁴⁰³ James Comer, "The Importance of Television Images of Black Families," in *Black Families and the Medium of Television*, Anthony Jackson, ed. (Ann Arbor: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy, 1982), 21.

⁴⁰⁴ Karl E. Bauman, Vangie A. Foshee, and G. Fletcher Linder, "Family Violence and the Perpetration of Adolescent Dating Violence: Examining Social Learning and Social Control Processes," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 2 (1999): 331–332.

⁴⁰⁵ Gruber and Thau, "Sexually," 440.

⁴⁰⁶ bell hooks, *Salvation*, 185.

at the mercy of mainstream media leaders and culturists, given today's selection of television shows about blacks. The more black people watch tableaux such as reality shows with violent, selfish, oversexed, loveless, and disrespectful storylines, the more they accept those lifestyles. What is on the screen has the potential to become reality. Cosby feels that depending on how informed or sophisticated the viewer is, anyone can begin to identify with unsavory elements of a character's life, or accept what they see as reality and attempt to perform or emulate the behaviors.⁴⁰⁷ In a study on adult learning, Janet Kow finds that people are influenced by what they see, and television programs have an effect on knowledge acquisition, regardless of age.⁴⁰⁸ Cosby's study supports these ideas by finding that exposure to an event on television can evoke emotional change, thus making television a useful tool for influence.⁴⁰⁹ Kow concludes that those with less formal education are prone to watching television the most.⁴¹⁰

In a notable study on adult exposure to smoking advertisements and tobacco use, Chaloupka et al. shed some light on the influence that television can have on adults. Conducted between 1999 and 2007, the study sought to determine if state-sponsored anti-smoking campaigns encouraged adults to stop smoking. Using a survey, they measured mean exposure to smoking-related advertisements in the top 75 US media markets.⁴¹¹ They found that higher exposure to anti-smoking advertisements was associated with less

⁴⁰⁷ Cosby, *Television's Imaginable Influences*, 14.

⁴⁰⁸ Janet Kow, "Television as a Tool of Environmental Adult Education: Limits and Possibilities," *Adult Learning* 13, no. 2/3 (2002): 31.

⁴⁰⁹ Cosby, *Television's Imaginable Influences*, 14.

⁴¹⁰ Kow, "Television as a Tool," 30.

⁴¹¹ Frank Chaloupka, Young Choi, Sherry Emery, Yoonsang Kim, Glen Szczypka and Melanie Wakefield, "The Effects of Smoking Related Television Advertising on Smoking and Intentions to Quit Among Adults in the United States: 1999–2007," *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. 4 (2012): 751.

smoking. The study showed strong evidence that media campaigns geared toward tobacco control helped reduce adult smoking.⁴¹² This confirms the influence television can have on its viewers when they are regularly exposed to its content.

Television can affect one's cultural identity, the description a people hold for themselves and for their children. Media scholar Chris Barker explains that people begin to identify with cultural identity as children and hold onto it into adulthood.⁴¹³ The way the black family appears in the media can affect how people think, identify, and define family, love, and marriage. These portrayals can have detrimental effects on the family and the survival of a viable black community. It can also significantly redirect the destructive course that some believe the black family has been on for decades. The effect on the audience may come down to how a show's creators decide to frame the story.

Educators, artists, cultural enthusiasts, and activists must work together to formulate a plan to address the concerns and challenges related to developing educational tools. The challenge is to teach children and adolescents how to use media to express themselves appropriately and have it be a tool of social activism. In his study on black popular culture, Neal states that strategies must be used that create new opportunities for young people to acquire knowledge and skills that help them navigate the cultural and socioeconomic atrocities that have historically shaped and affected black life.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Chaloupka et al., "The Effects of Smoking Related Television," 756.

⁴¹³ Chris Barker, *Television, Globalization*, 9.

⁴¹⁴ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies*, 99.

African-American Adolescents: Analysis of Television's Effect

Health researchers Brian Gordon, Mike Perko, and Michael Taylor found a greater shift toward life imitating art when it involved values, behaviors, and societal norms.⁴¹⁵ Berry et al. found that content on TV is widespread, making the medium a wealth of information about social institutions for adolescents.⁴¹⁶ Youth's constant exposure to media's excessive positive and negative messages leads to attitudes that are more permissive and actions that demonstrate a willingness to take greater risks. Unfortunately, more risks are taken to emulate behaviors that are negative if they seem to give a positive reward, such as popularity.⁴¹⁷ Studies have shown that adolescents who spend a lot of time exposed to the media are more likely to look down on virginity, fail to protest premarital sex, and argue in favor of gender and sexual stereotypes.⁴¹⁸

Media scholars Jane Brown, Kelly L'Engle, and Carol Pardun note that adolescents use the media as a teaching tool to learn about dating and sexual relationships, as well as a way to cope with their newly forming sexuality.⁴¹⁹ Berry et al. argue that a necessary period of sexual exploration and development occurs during adolescence. During this time, adolescents decide which sexual behaviors are moral, enjoyable, and acceptable for their age group. In this period, teens also begin to develop

⁴¹⁵ Gordon et al., "A Review of Sexual Content," 217–223.

⁴¹⁶ Sandra H. Berry, Rebecca L. Collins, Marc N. Elliott, Sarah B. Hunter, David E. Kanouse, Janna L. Kim, Dale Kunkel, and Angela Miu, "Sexual Readiness, Household Policies, and Other Predictors of Adolescents' Exposure to Sexual Content in Mainstream Entertainment Television," *Media Psychology*, 8 (2006): 450.

⁴¹⁷ Berry et al., "Sexual Readiness," 450.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Jane Brown, Kelly L'Engle, and Carol Pardun, "Linking Exposure to Outcomes: Early Adolescents' Consumption of Sexual Content in Six Media," *Mass Communication & Society* 8, no. 2 (2005): 89.

their attitudes about love and become sexually active.⁴²⁰ The researchers also suggest that even though intercourse among youths is common, most who engage in sexual activity wished they had waited. This suggests that adolescents are having sex without considering its consequences.⁴²¹ According to other studies cited by Berry et al., sexual content in US media is heavy, and the media fails to portray the consequences of risky sexual encounters. Only 15% of shows containing sexual content also depict consequences associated with risky sexual behavior.⁴²² This implies that media, specifically television, in the United States is likely to promote early sexual expression in adolescents rather than deter it.

Media content is not always realistic, and adolescents cannot always determine what is real and what is not. It is highly probable that what they learn pertaining to sex in the media is unrealistic. Researchers Jane Brown et al., writing in the *Journal of Sex Research*, state:

Junior and senior high school students who frequently viewed daytime soap operas were more likely, than those who watched less, to believe that single mothers have relatively easy lives, good jobs, and do not live in poverty. Exposure to stereotypical images of gender and sexuality in music videos has been found to increase older adolescents' acceptance of non-marital sexual behavior and interpersonal violence. Heavier television viewers also have been found to have more negative attitudes toward remaining a virgin. Others have shown that prolonged exposure to erotica leads to exaggerated estimates of the prevalence of more unusual kinds of sexual activity, less expectation of sexual exclusivity with partners, and apprehension that sexual inactivity constitutes a health risk. In one experimental study, college students who were exposed to about 5 hours of sexually explicit films over 6 weeks were more likely than a

⁴²⁰ Berry et al., "Watching Sex," 280.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Jane Brown et al., "Linking Exposure," 76.

control group to express increased callousness toward women and trivialize rape as a criminal offense.⁴²³

Heavy exposure to sexual content in media can also affect an adolescent's developing beliefs about cultural norms. It could also cultivate the myth that sexual activity is more common in daily life than it really is. The strong message of sex in the media can lead to the early onset of sexual activity in adolescents and alter their beliefs about sex.

The negative consequences of this behavior are unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Berry et al. found that, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for every four sexually active teens in the United States, one case of STDs is diagnosed each year. The United States carries the highest rate of teen pregnancy among all industrialized countries. STDs and unplanned pregnancies are most prevalent among those who engage in sexual activity earlier.⁴²⁴ Gruber and Thau found that African-American adolescents are significantly more likely to be sexually experienced (72%) and they have an earlier median age of first intercourse (15.8 years) than whites, Hispanic Americans, or Asian Americans (16.6, 17.0, and 18.1, respectively).⁴²⁵ The strong messages of sex in the media may positively correlate to spikes in African-American youth sexual behavior, and thus may contribute to the failure of African-Americans to engage in creating and sustaining successful and strong families.⁴²⁶ If there is no positive reinforcement from parents or proximal community,

⁴²³ Jane Brown, "Mass Media Influences on Sexuality," *The Journal of Sex Research* 39, no. 1 (2002): 44.

⁴²⁴ Berry et al., "Watching Sex," 280.

⁴²⁵ Gruber and Thau, "Sexually," 445.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 446, 450.

television is the teaching tool⁴²⁷, and if all that children see is sex—not love, marriage, and family—then all they will learn is sex.

Berry et al. state that African-American youth watch more television than other cultural groups and are more likely to use TV as a source of relationship information than any other group.⁴²⁸ Historically, this is not good. Television has immortalized racist views about an American society that does not include African-Americans. Gruber notes that this action denied minority children realistic representations of themselves and portrayed their participation as insignificant. Even when African-Americans appear in the media, they often have roles that reinforce stereotypes or lifestyles that are far from the reality most African-Americans live in.⁴²⁹ The media offers the African-American adolescent the opportunity to gain knowledge and exposure to life and a view of the world not otherwise readily available to them. This in turn plays an important role in their socialization.⁴³⁰

Gruber et al. note that this further implies that television may present role models (that African-American adolescents emulate and to which they aspire) that negatively affect their self-image, attitudes, and behaviors by depicting unattainable and unrealistic goals or lifestyles.⁴³¹ African-American adolescents reportedly watch TV heavily during meals, and it serves as one of their leisure activities. Gruber and Thau report, “They watch more soap operas and R-rated movies, view more minority-oriented fare, and are

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 444.

⁴²⁸ Berry et al., “Watching Sex,” 287.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 444.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Gruber and Thau, “Sexually,” 444.

more likely than White adolescents to perceive fictional minority characters as true to life.”⁴³² African-American adolescents also have a lower social ability to express themselves emotionally and are more willing to accept sexual stereotypes in the media as real. If they receive high levels of sexual content in the media, they are more likely to imitate that behavior. If black youth partake in televised content more so than white youth and, collectively, adolescents watch more sexually charged television than most, then African-American youth are exposed to more sexual content in the media than whites are.⁴³³ Furthermore, Gruber notes that the developmental period for adolescents could make this age group more vulnerable to sexual content on television and at increased risk since adolescents of color are prone to begin puberty earlier. They therefore have a greater desire to learn from this extremely accessible source and fulfill the need for role models not available to them in their closest community.⁴³⁴

African-Americans are not the only members of society distinctively affected by television. Other races also respond to television programming pertaining to African-American people. A study by Yuki Fujioka, published in 1999, deals with stereotypes, and how African-Americans are perceived when there is a lack of direct contact. The researcher hypothesized that vicarious contact affects perceptions of African-Americans. He found that exposure to negative stereotypes of African-Americans on television lead to negative stereotypical ideas. His study also found that positive African-American characterizations reduced negative thoughts. The negativity subsided more when

⁴³² Ibid., 450.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

subjects saw African-Americans on television acting in counter-stereotypical ways.

Based on the results of his study, Fujioka contends that television has great potential for stereotype reduction.⁴³⁵ As many studies show, black people and specifically black adolescents use television as one tool for forming social norms. It is important to look at available programming that teaches them about family, marriage, and love relationships.

Rather Laugh than Cry: The Black Situation Comedy

Media scholar Herman Gray identified sports and comedies as the two genres of television entertainment between 1980 and 2000 in which black people typically appeared.⁴³⁶ Communications researcher Jack Glascock found that comedies offer more black representation than other forms of media entertainment. Historically, blacks were more likely to be seen in comedies than dramas and more in comedies than whites until recent years.⁴³⁷ The highest black representation in television media is typically in shows with an all-black cast.⁴³⁸ However, few situation comedies on major television networks have black casts. The only such program on a major network today is *Black-ish*.

The last three decades produced many black situation comedies centered on family. Gordon Berry's study on black families on television found African-American characters are present in comedies more often than dramas.⁴³⁹ Black television and cultural researcher Robin Means Coleman, in her study about black viewers, found that

⁴³⁵ Yuki Fujioka, "Television Portrayals and African American Stereotypes: Examination of Television Effect When Direct Contact is Lacking," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (1999): 54, 71.

⁴³⁶ Gray, *Watching Race*, xxi.

⁴³⁷ Jack Glascock, "Gender, Race, and Aggression in Newer TV Networks' Primetime Programming," *Communication Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2003): 92.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Berry, "Black Family Life," 237.

the views that the general population has about black people reveal that media owners, producers, and directors are biased. They have preconceived notions that black people are really the buffoonish, clown-like characters relentlessly portrayed by television since the early 1900s. Thus, when a decision to produce a show that does not conform to their concept of black life arises, it proves to be difficult.⁴⁴⁰

Thomas Ford found that humor might play an important role in mediating the effect of stereotypical portrayals regarding perceptions of individual group members.⁴⁴¹ History has shown that black family comedies tend to make the larger viewing audience comfortable with black people on television. Coleman notes that dramas demand that African-Americans be taken seriously. Black situation comedies have done quite well for networks, whereas dramas depicting black life have failed.⁴⁴² Lawrence Mintz states that comedy is the modern world's most familiar art form.⁴⁴³ Coleman explains that comedy, specifically situation comedy, relies on issues and problems found within society. It describes the social life and culture of Americans in the representations of relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers that make up a television family.⁴⁴⁴

Humor can have a positive influence on people and teach them valuable lessons, as long as the product is honest and respectful. Humor can reveal social issues within a particular culture in order to end prejudices. In a study on how Hollywood products can vilify people, film and culture researcher Linnea Hussein notes that self-deprecating

⁴⁴⁰ Coleman, *African America Viewers*, xii.

⁴⁴¹ Thomas Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Portrayals," 272.

⁴⁴² Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 2.

⁴⁴³ Lawrence Mintz, "Situation Comedy," in *TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide*, Brian Rose, ed. (New York, Greenwood, 1985), 108.

⁴⁴⁴ Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 4.

humor counteracts stereotypes and neutralizes those who perpetuate prejudicial humor toward others.⁴⁴⁵ Coleman's research produced evidence in a variety of studies that suggested that, during the years *The Cosby Show* was airing, black self-image improved and simultaneously altered many whites' perceptions of blacks.⁴⁴⁶ Coleman feels that *The Cosby Show* worked because it presented a positive, psychologically healthy family that was supportive, displayed family life, and taught valuable lessons designed deliberately to have a positive impact on viewers.⁴⁴⁷ Black characters poked fun and shed light on attributes and experiences of black life, which made the show enlightening and enjoyable to multicultural audiences.

Coleman reveals that African-Americans appear in situation comedies more often than in any other story line genre of television and are often cast in starring and supporting roles.⁴⁴⁸ One possible reason may be that disparaging a social group through humor increases tolerance and/or acceptance of discrimination against out-groups. This premise is consistent with research on contemporary models of racism, including symbolic racism, modern racism, and aversive racism. Ford states that these models suggest that racial attitudes of whites have become ambivalent, containing both positive and negative components.⁴⁴⁹ As a result, people are more likely to engage in discriminatory social judgment when exposed to disparaging humor.

⁴⁴⁵ Linnea Hussein, "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People," *Film and History*, 40 (2010): 119.

⁴⁴⁶ Coleman, *African American Viewers*, xiii.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴⁹ Thomas Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals," 272.

Recounting Ford's study on the effects of stereotypical television portrayal, the majority of owners of television media outlets who determine programming consciously espouse egalitarian values and proclaim non-prejudiced attitudes to varying degrees. Yet they have, whether consciously or unconsciously, negative sentiments toward blacks.⁴⁵⁰ Ford states that while using their power and arming themselves with preconceived notions about black people, television programmers are apt to discriminate in subtle and indirect ways. These can be rationalized as socially acceptable and therefore not compromise their self-conception as non-prejudiced.⁴⁵¹

Preconceived notions that white media owners may have about minorities are shown in the experience of a media executive who sought to push minority programming to white-owned outlets. Media scholars Janette Dates and Thomas Mascaro wrote about a panel discussion held by the National Association of Minority Media Executives on minorities in television that was part of the 2005 meeting of the National Association of Television Program Executives. Fernando Espuelas, then chair of the Voy Group, shared his experience with media executives who had no realistic conception of minorities in America. He stated that when looking at the depictions of Hispanics, Asians, African-Americans, or any other minority on television, roughly 80% of minority characters fall into a few categories: drug dealer, recent immigrant who does not speak English, and domestic. He believed available programming does not reflect the reality of minorities or

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 272.

their aspirations in life. He feared that if his son were to take what he sees on television literally, he would define himself negatively.⁴⁵²

Dates and Mascaro report that Espuelas went on to describe his experience when attempting to promote minority programs to cable executives. He recalled his attempt to launch a new cable network for Hispanics. He made it clear that though he received anti-Hispanic statements, he had received similar comments while trying to promote black programs. Espuelas' organization found its concept of success and used the success of the specific cultural subject in all presentations. He explained to cable executives that in the context of Hispanic culture, optimism and empowerment are both Hispanic and American values. Thinking that he had made a breakthrough when the cable executive stated that this proposition was interesting, Espuelas quickly learned he was mistaken. The cable executive went on to say how he has never associated Hispanics with success.⁴⁵³ Any television executive sharing this sentiment affects programing depicting any minority and limits the cultural interpretation of white programmers.

Zook, who wrote about the rise of black representation on television, states that TV, or any form of media, is not merely a reflection of reality but a mechanism for creating reality. African-Americans unable to have a seat at the table of media decision making may well contribute to perpetuating institutional racism. This is currently evident in primetime television slots and the continued portrayal of insensitive caricatures. A lack of green-lit movie projects, inauthentic representation, and show cancellations before

⁴⁵² Jannette Dates and Thomas Mascaro, "African Americans in Film and Television," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 33, no. 2 (2005): 52.

⁴⁵³ Dates and Mascaro, "African Americans in Film and Television," 52.

accessing syndication monies is the norm. At various times between 1980 and 2000, black writers, producers, and programmers have been able to create shows with positive depictions of black life. This progress, predominantly in comedies, is due to black cast comedies and not dramas.⁴⁵⁴

Ford's study found comedies provide an outlet to address racial and social issues in a context that is entertaining but also ambiguous. Through humorous mocking of cultural groups, social norms defining acceptable behavior become ambiguous and foster discrimination.⁴⁵⁵ Disparaging humor creates a climate in which norms of acceptable behavior are temporarily relaxed, and discrimination against out-groups can happen. This comedic climate could encourage discriminatory behavior and easily be rationalized as falling within the bounds of social acceptability.⁴⁵⁶

Coleman's study on African-American viewers found that most critiques of black comedies focus on how a show demonstrates black culture and life through its characters. The shows inform viewers of black culture through histories, events, and cultural characteristics with meanings that are associated with black existence.⁴⁵⁷ Black situation comedies focus uniquely on black experiences with culture, art, politics, and economics.⁴⁵⁸

Ford also studied the exposure of viewers to negative African-American stereotypes in comedies. He considered preconceived notions that select viewers may

⁴⁵⁴ Zook, *Color by FOX*, 3–5, 9, 78, 103.

⁴⁵⁵ Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals," 272.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 5.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

already have about black people. Viewers' evaluations of black people were significantly more negative after exposure to comedic stereotypes. He finds that there is power in seemingly harmless comedic portrayals of stereotypical social out-group roles. These portrayals influence how one thinks about and responds to members of the group.⁴⁵⁹

Ford further states that television, though an instrument of entertainment, is a tool of great influence. The powerful white people who control and operate Hollywood tell the world the history they wish it to know. Their predilection to set standards for all cultures and influence what will be popular and accepted requires an academic and psychosocial critique. Those in positions of power are consciously concerned with maintaining the status quo. As previously stated, many in mainstream society attempt to portray an egalitarian and non-prejudiced self-image. The mainstream is not always aware of the blatant or overt acts of discrimination that it perpetuates. Discrimination is subtle, indirect, and often rationalized as socially acceptable or nondiscriminatory in mainstream society, which does not often challenge its self-concept as non-prejudiced. According to Ford, discrimination is most likely to occur when social norms are unclear. This is especially true when it applies to behaviors in social settings or wherever non-racial justifications and accepted discriminatory actions happen.⁴⁶⁰

Berry, in his study on black families and the socialization of black children, notes that decision makers in television are not clear in their values and norms related to depictions of African-Americans. This lack of clarity contributes to perpetuating discrimination against black people. The television program is the decision maker's tool

⁴⁵⁹ Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals," 271.

⁴⁶⁰ Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals," 272.

for discontent—intentional or otherwise. Comedies allowed the action to happen subtly. Early media frequently ignored black people and subjected them to stereotypes that led viewers and listeners into believing that blacks were not equal to whites.⁴⁶¹ Means, in her audience study, notes that it is possible that this has been one guiding characteristic in creating shows about black people. This observation is seen in many shows in which black representation has been scarce, or where roles were subservient, underprivileged, or criminal.⁴⁶² A factor in how African-Americans appear on television is that they must use a lens that would ease tensions that whites may have about their own identity and their place in society.⁴⁶³

Darnell Hunt completed research on television as it relates to race. He notes that as there are far more blacks appearing in comedies, and far more black comedies than dramas, an observer would believe there is a reason mainstream audiences prefer black comedies as opposed to dramas. Humor releases repressed hostility.⁴⁶⁴ A show of black solidarity has historically been troubling to white audiences.⁴⁶⁵ When black life looks humorous, it becomes docile and pleasurable to whites.⁴⁶⁶ Black life made humorous is an integral part of white uncertainty toward what they consider real blackness.⁴⁶⁷

Additionally, there is no challenge to white privilege by black life when it is comical. Comedy does not challenge privilege or support widespread notions of

⁴⁶¹ Berry, "Black Family Life," 235.

⁴⁶² Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 29.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30

⁴⁶⁴ Hunt, *Channeling Blackness*, 233.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

racism.⁴⁶⁸ Black comedies provide a space for white audiences to feel comfortable viewing black life as they believe it to be. Hunt notes that this space is not real, serious, predisposed to racism, and not at all negatively affected by suppression.⁴⁶⁹ Mainstream black shows tend to shy away from racial issues and politics and pay tribute to American idealism regarding race relations. There persist ideals, symbols of black life and culture that are undeniable and distinctly recognized as African-American.⁴⁷⁰ Recalling Berry's study, television comedies help American viewers adjust to a social order of blacks subservient to whites, support long-established patterns, and perpetuate those traditions in popular culture.⁴⁷¹ Scholars theorize that blacks appear in more comedies than dramas due to decisions made on how African-Americans should be framed, and these restrict the themes and values allowed for exploring black life.⁴⁷²

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, television programming began to allow black characters to be more socially conscious and respond bluntly and militantly to racial situations. *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Jeffersons* are shows in which characters spoke out against inequality. Mainstream audiences approved of them based on their ratings and longevity. Mainstream audiences may also have enjoyed these shows because, as Ford states, humor can play a mediating role in offsetting effects of the perception of stereotypical portrayals.⁴⁷³ Consider *The Jeffersons*, which ran from 1975 to 1985. George consistently calls his neighbor and in-law, Tom Willis, a "honky." This

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 234, 240.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 240.

⁴⁷¹ Berry, "Black Family Life," 236.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals," 272.

was widely accepted at the time as humorous behavior because George and Tom actually had a decent relationship. George's insult to Tom, outside the confines of humor, would be racist and definitely offensive.

The context of comedies portraying stereotypical, buffoonish, and loudmouthed black people becomes one of quality and truthfulness. That is, if a black family is portrayed on television, is it done in a way that depicts its strengths and successes? Given the long run of certain black comedies that received significant criticism there are compelling reasons to study the content surrounding the black family culture depicted. It also begs the question, "Was it just a simulation of what media owners, producers, and directors decided?"

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In this section, the researcher attempts to shed more light on the relationship between black men and women and how their attitudes relay into perceptions about black families. Also noted are trends in African-American families that are formed out of necessity or choice. This section contains a description of how black families are portrayed and how roles in black families became fluid. The researcher suggests scholars missed important factors when they analyzed the black family using a dominant, mainstream American lens. This section also contains a summary of how the pivotal Civil Rights Movement opened the door to increased black television representation, its progression, and peak during the Reagan era. The discussion then goes back to shed light on the impetus for black families on television. The researcher then covers the black family programming that made its way into the primetime television lineup. In the last section, the researcher provides more history about black humor and why, if television shows were used as a teaching tool, comedy would be the most likely genre.

Perceived Beginnings of Black Family Woes: The Black Man and the Black Woman

It is highly plausible that the visible social contempt between black women and men is a result of social conditioning carried down since the period of enslavement. Separation of the slaves from loved ones was essential for the slave owner's plan to

dominate and control. Years of exposure to the system of oppression served white families economically while simultaneously destroying the self-esteem of black men and scapegoating the black woman in matters of family failures. Looking at this information, scholar bell hooks believes that family relationships were destroyed to prevent the black man and woman from rebelling together against racism.⁴⁷⁴

The residue from this policy persists. It is quite common in the black community to hear black men and women say they cannot stand each other. hooks notes in an anthology entitled *The Black Woman*, that a black man is credited with saying that the black woman is the downfall of the black man. She is evil, hard to get along with, domineering, suspicious, and narrow-minded. In short, she is a black ugly bitch.⁴⁷⁵

In Toni Cade's anthology, Abbey Lincoln stated that the black man's description of the black woman is used as the excuse for her suffering both physical and emotional humiliation, but that she is still be expected to function.⁴⁷⁶ Though the black woman is the champion of the black male, she is often accused of emasculating him.⁴⁷⁷ Lincoln explains that the same culprit that cultivated that idea about the black woman is the same culprit that oppresses the black man.⁴⁷⁸ The black male has misunderstood the black woman's frustration.⁴⁷⁹ France Beale states that at the crux of the issues between the

⁴⁷⁴ hooks, *Salvation*, 160.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁷⁶ Abbey Lincoln, *To Whom Will She Cry Rape?* In *The Black Woman: AN Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 83.

⁴⁷⁷ Abbey Lincoln, *To Whom Will She Cry Rape?* In *The Black Woman: AN Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 84.

⁴⁷⁸ Abbey Lincoln, *To Whom Will She Cry Rape?* In *The Black Woman: AN Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 85.

⁴⁷⁹ Abbey Lincoln, *To Whom Will She Cry Rape?* In *The Black Woman: AN Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 85.

black woman and the black man in the family structure is his difficulty in finding meaningful and productive employment and her ability to find work often.⁴⁸⁰ Women often misunderstood the condition of the male and determined that he was shiftless and lazy.⁴⁸¹ As such, the relationship between black women and black men has been damaged and the result has been a separation from the family.⁴⁸²

hooks states that the black man has been forced, either by economic or emotional destruction, to abandon the family and he blames the black woman.⁴⁸³ If this is truly the case, how is the black family to form, survive, and continue? Where are examples of intact, strong, and thriving black families? How are they to be developed? According to hooks, the process begins when the black woman and man see each other as equal partners outside of the dominant society's sexist norms. As Lincoln stated, when the black woman says anything about the black man she is including herself as well. They are reflective of each other.⁴⁸⁴ There has to be some solidarity between the adults in a family. One cannot dominate the other, as love and domination are antithetical. Black couples deserve to have a valued relationship.⁴⁸⁵ A loving foundation gives the family a strong base from which to develop and sustain itself. This process of forming a strong foundation is not always easy, but it is imperative for a long-lasting relationship.

⁴⁸⁰ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 90.

⁴⁸¹ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 91.

⁴⁸² Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 91.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Abbey Lincoln, *To Whom Will She Cry Rape?* In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara, editor (New York, Washington Square Press, 1970), 86.

⁴⁸⁵ Hooks, *Salvation*, 167, 169.

The black community must understand the importance of good family formation and how family roles and expectations can be sufficiently fulfilled. There must also be a good foundation. Patricia Dixon, who writes on African-American families and relationships, includes theoretical studies by other scholars. She calls attention to Maulana Karenga, professor of African-American Studies, who did extensive research on African-American life. Karenga finds three significant ideologies have a negative effect on African-American relationships, including dating and mating activities. He contends that capitalism, racism, and sexism turn African-American relationships into short-term relationships whose primary purpose is the mutual misuse of the body.⁴⁸⁶ These values transform relationships into connections that he calls the cash connection (exchanging sex for money), the flesh connection (the objectification of the body for sex), the force connection (exercising physical strength to subdue women), and the dependency connection (after being reduced to a commodity, the woman is completely dependent on the man). These connections prevent the development of a loving, mature relationship.⁴⁸⁷

It is imperative that a black man and black woman exemplify values that resist modification for acceptance in order to prevent falling into a connection. There must be a dating process, completed in its entirety, before falling into a connection relationship.⁴⁸⁸ For instance, those who are looking for a long-term relationship may wish to refrain from physical intimacy before there is emotional, mental, or spiritual intimacy. Karenga suggests that doing so may cause the death of the relationship before an emotional bond

⁴⁸⁶ Patricia Dixon, *African American Relationships, Marriages, and Families* (New York Routledge, 2007), 133.

⁴⁸⁷ Dixon, *African American Relationships*, 134.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

can form and blossom into a solid and enduring relationship. Noted evolutionary psychologists David Buss and Cindy Meston agree that having sex as a means to encourage the man to love the woman does not work; instead it creates only a temporary illusion of feeling loved.⁴⁸⁹

Robert Staples, cultural researcher on the black family, states that dating is historically the first step toward forming a family.⁴⁹⁰ For blacks living in the South before the mass migration north and west, people met in neighborhoods, churches, or schools and formed emotional attachments that led to marriage. After the Great Migration, house parties and school interactions were how people dated. This was more evident among blacks with less socioeconomic means. Middle-class and higher-class blacks adopted the dating characteristics of white people and were able to include other dating activities such as dancing, bowling, or going to the movies.⁴⁹¹

Dating changed as attitudes toward the family changed. The characteristics of the participants and the purpose of dating changed, and variations of dating life began.⁴⁹² Staples notes that the large numbers of individuals remaining unmarried has changed the age of the dater from a young adult to middle aged or older. The pool of daters has increased due to divorce and low remarriage rates. Dating has become a temporary event for sexual purposes, not a prelude to marriage. Dating does not involve a formal

⁴⁸⁹ David Buss and Cindy Meston, *Why Women Have Sex—Understanding Sexual Motivation—From Adventure to Revenge (and Everything in Between): The Psychology of Sex in Women's Own Voices* (New York: Times Books, 2009), 61.

⁴⁹⁰ Staples, *The Black Family*, 40.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*

arrangement for a public outing, as it did in the past.⁴⁹³ Many single blacks now prefer only conjugal, impersonal relationships.⁴⁹⁴ As the black community becomes increasingly more comfortable with this arrangement, the creation and viability of black families and marriages are affected.

People learn behaviors partly by watching others. Due to the declining rate of marriage in the black community, there may be a lack of examples of what a successful, intimate love relationship looks like. Television can be an excellent tool for black people to learn how to engage in a successful relationship. Some shows started a conversation in academia, suggesting that they either present a social issue or have some significant social value. Positive television shows, reinforced with discourse about the black family and relationships, offer good examples for black people to consider. Additionally, the community has an opportunity to learn some creative ways to have solid family relationships.

Diversity and New Trends in African-American Family Structures

Studies often ignore the diversity of the black family—the ethnic, regional, religious, value, and income differences in black families. Due to the constant stereotypical portrayals that are dominant, there is an inherent ignorance pertaining to the diversity of black families.⁴⁹⁵ There are differences within the group as well as outside

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁹⁵ Walter Allen, "African American Family Life in Societal Context: Crisis and Hope," *Sociological Forum* 10, no. 4 (1995): 570.

the group that make black families so diverse.⁴⁹⁶ Black families are more than single-mother, low-income households. In a 1974 study on low-income black families, it was noted that households are joined together as networks for pooled resources.⁴⁹⁷

African-American lives are marked by significant changes prompted by the need to survive discrimination and systematic racism. Four events have contributed to this change: capture into slavery; emancipation; geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural transition from the South to the North; and national desegregation.⁴⁹⁸ All of these events had an effect on the black family structure.⁴⁹⁹ The literature is full of references that note the black family as an underclass culture of poverty, pathology, family disorganization, and matriarchy.⁵⁰⁰ These implications are often noted as a way of summarizing the black family life in American society. The more they are repeated the more believable they become and the more they dehumanize the black family.⁵⁰¹ In actuality, there are significant qualities, dimensions, characteristics, and distinctive features that define the black family as a structure that is not monolithic.⁵⁰² The black population in the United States has never been monolithic. African slaves arrived in America from various nations, speaking various languages. Exposure and forced participation in various American immigrant cultures, as well as exposure to native culture, further influenced

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Stephen Marks, "Teasing out the Lessons of the 1960s: Family Diversity and Family Privilege," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, no. 3 (2000): 610.

⁴⁹⁸ Allen, "African American Family Life," 572–573.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 572.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 571.

⁵⁰¹ Allen, "African American Family Life," 571.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 572.

their diversity.⁵⁰³ Black families can be defined by coincidental households, blood ties, functional ties, shared location, affiliation, or analytic decision—and these factors can overlap or intersect.⁵⁰⁴ Black families represent complex systems of relationships that can transcend any one of these life factors.⁵⁰⁵

Black family structures can be parent-child, parent-parent-child, parent-grandparent-child, parent-aunt-or-uncle-child, sister-brother-aunt-grandparent, grandparent-grandchild, neighbor-neighbor-child, schoolmate-schoolmate-teacher, teacher-child, and many more such combinations. The common connection in these examples is the child. In African-Americans, the family unit was created to address the needs of adults (especially elder adults), but the main factor for its formation was the child and childcare.⁵⁰⁶ The younger members of the family represent the conduit within generations, individuals within the community, and members within the extended family that form the major members of the black family unit.⁵⁰⁷ These extended family members include cousins, siblings, classmates, aunts, uncles, church members, friends, neighbors, teachers, or any significant contributor to the child's wellbeing.⁵⁰⁸

In 1978, noted black family researcher Wade Noble identified several characteristics that make the black family diverse. He notes that his list is not exhaustive, but states:

⁵⁰³ M. Curtis Brown, Dante Bryant, and Jason Shelton, "We, as a People? Assessing the Consequences of Various Sources of Diversity within Black America," *Phylon* 53, no. 2 (2016): 79–80.

⁵⁰⁴ Allen, "African American Family Life," 572.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Cassandra Chaney, "Bridging the Gap: Promoting Intergenerational Family Literacy among Low-Income, African American Families," *The Journal of Negro Education* 83, no. 1 (2014): 36.

⁵⁰⁸ Chaney, "Bridging the Gap," 36.

The special characteristics of black families are identified as (1) they are comprised of several individual households, with the family definition and lines of authority and support transcending or going beyond any one household unit which compromise the “family”; (2) they are structurally expanding and diminishing in response to external condition (elasticity); (3) they have a child-centered system (the general organizational purpose of the family focuses on, if not requires, the presence of children); (4) they have a close network of relationships between families not necessarily related by blood (family networking); (5) they have flexible and interchangeable role definitions and performance (in childbearing a clear distinction is maintained between role definition (sex-linked) and role performance (sexless); and (6) they have multiple parenting and interfamilial consensual adoptions.⁵⁰⁹

These characteristics were created out of necessity due to poverty⁵¹⁰ and have persisted even if poverty was not the catalyst.⁵¹¹ African-American families have a depth that is uncharacteristic of European American families. European American families are typically organized according to a nuclear, triadic family model, (i.e., father, mother, and child). It is customary for African-American families to extend across several households whereby their children are in possession of several extensions of family, by blood or affiliation.⁵¹²

Diversity in the African-American community has flourished. The growth of the black middle class has doubled in size since 1965 and now includes immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa.⁵¹³ Belief systems based on status have increasingly emerged, which also contributes to the vastness of black American diversity.⁵¹⁴ As such, black

⁵⁰⁹ Wade Nobles, “Toward an Empirical and Theoretical Framework for Defining Black Families,” *Marriage and Families* 40, no. 4 (1978): 687.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹¹ Brown et al., “We, as a People?” 80.

⁵¹² Chaney, “Bridging the Gap,” 34.

⁵¹³ Brown et al., “We, as a People?,” 80.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80–82.

family structures continue to come in different sizes and be inclusive of an array of generations and an array of cultures.

African-American families are becoming more diverse and new structures are taking the place of the traditional family system.⁵¹⁵ The most recognized family structure in the black community, and the one that is increasing in vast numbers, is the single-person household.⁵¹⁶ This is especially true among black women. Many may have decided to further their socioeconomic class and delay marriage and families. This is contributing to the slight growth of the black middle class, though there has been a decline in marriage.⁵¹⁷ A study on the rise of the black middle class revealed a growing number of blacks ages 25 to 44 who live alone, have never been married, have high-wage occupations and advanced degrees, maintain household incomes above the average, and own their own homes.⁵¹⁸ Researchers contend that this group of blacks could be seen as part of the Love Jones Cohort. The Love Jones Cohort, named after the characters in the 1997 movie, *Love Jones*, pertains to young professionals who have decided that marriage and a committed relationship are not as important to them as their careers.⁵¹⁹ Those who resort to this approach have taken another route to improve class status. They have decided to stabilize their socioeconomic position by not marrying and continuing to live

⁵¹⁵ Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 37.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Lynne Casper, Philip Cohen, William Darity, Kris Marsh, and Danielle Salters, "The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Along," *Social Forces* 86, no. 2 (2007): 738, 740.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 736.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 737.

alone.⁵²⁰ This not only affects whether a person will get married, but also what a person will find attractive in a mate, if she or he decides to marry later in life.⁵²¹

A growing number of African-American adults are not married, but willing to cohabit with the opposite or the same sex.⁵²² There are growing numbers of households in which same-sex parents are rearing children. Some may argue that this is not indicative of an African-American family, but instead shows conformity to popular culture. However, if it falls within the characteristics of an African-American family, it needs to be included.

Incremental introduction of the enslaved to developing white American family traditions had little meaning to the African-American.⁵²³ White slave owners saw little value in African family traditions pertaining to their slave commodities, and slaves developed alternate family structures in their communities.⁵²⁴ Some family roles and functions adopted by slaves actually derived from traditional African cultural patterns.⁵²⁵ Alternative family structures (alternate if measured by white family standards) are not new in the African-American community. Roles in black families are fluid depending on the situation.⁵²⁶ For instance, if a parent becomes ill, an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or even neighbors take on the role of parent. Family lines in the African-American community often blur as a family could contain members related by blood, marriage, or even those

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 740.

⁵²¹ Casper et al., "The Emerging Black Middle Class," 750, 753.

⁵²² Billingsley, *Climbing Jacobs Ladder*, 38.

⁵²³ Shirley Hill, *Black Intimacies; Gender Perspective on Families and Relationships: The Gender Lens Series*, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 58.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 52, 57.

⁵²⁵ Robert Hill, *Strengths of African American Families: Twenty-Five Years Later* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), iii.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 107.

who were taken in.⁵²⁷ This example is a strength of African-American families. It is part of a definition that provides different points-of-view and negates what some were led to believe about the African-American family.

Strengths of Black Families

The family is the primary socializer and the place where most of one's personality and identity are formed. The family transmits cultural and subcultural norms as well as values.⁵²⁸ Strengths of the family are developed and passed down in the home. The characteristic strengths of family that Hill deemed necessary for black family survival, development, and stability are strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, strong achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation. Hill has stressed that even though these traits are within white families, they manifest differently in black families because of generational exposure to racial oppression and inequities in America. These traits are adaptations to exposure to a hostile environment and provide tools for advancement and survival.⁵²⁹

Strong Kinship Bonds

The first strength, strong kinship bonds, has subcategories: absorption of individuals, absorption of families, and informal adoption. The bond of kinship directly relates to the historic economic state of black people. Low-income families are more apt

⁵²⁷ Robert Hill, *Research on the African American Family: A Holistic Perspective* (Westport: Auburn House, 1993), 105.

⁵²⁸ Bishetta Merritt and Carolyn Stroman, "Black Family Imagery and Interactions on Television," *Journal of Black Studies* 23, no. 4 (1993): 492.

⁵²⁹ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, xix, xx.

to have stronger ties to kinfolks than middle-class and upper-class families.⁵³⁰ Hill states that black families absorb individuals by taking in the young and elderly. Black families are more likely to take in young family members than white families. Families headed by single women take in young members of their extended families more often than those having both a mother and father. Families headed by elderly women take in the most children.⁵³¹ In addition to taking in young relatives, black people also take in elderly family members, who may play significant roles in the household.⁵³² These older members are able to pass on information about life and family history that parents may not know. They may also provide additional income, in some instances, and some are able to babysit grandchildren, which aids the parent(s).⁵³³

Black families also absorb entire family units of their relations, if needed. The practice of “doubling up” was once commonplace in black communities. It occurs when two whole families, whether blood relatives or people who know each other, live in the same home. Doubling up was prevalent during black migration to the urban northern and developing western areas and has persisted through the decades. Though there has been a steady drop in doubling up over the years, it still happens in some black households.⁵³⁴

Strong Work Ethic

Strong work ethic suggests a person would rather labor than receive public assistance. Hill’s study found that blacks are willing to work without coercion for a

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁵³¹ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, 1.

⁵³² Ibid., 2.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

decent wage. Hill's research about the strengths of African-American families found that 60% of poor blacks worked compared to half of poor whites.⁵³⁵ Based on studies relating to blacks and their attitudes about work, Hill reported that the desire among blacks to work was similar to that of whites.⁵³⁶ Blacks have job aspirations, they feel satisfied, and have a sense of personal security in employment.⁵³⁷ Working husbands and wives create double-earner households.⁵³⁸ When Hill updated his study in 1999, he found that a strong work ethic was still a strength of black families. The majority of those receiving welfare preferred to work, a large number of poor people were not on public assistance, and the number of working black women who headed households increased 13% since 1970.⁵³⁹ He writes that the working man is important, but the working wife is also a primary factor in preventing the entire family from living in poverty.⁵⁴⁰ The implications of a strong work ethic among men and women in the 1999 study was that youth who have a strong work ethic were employed, often accepting low-paying jobs that white youths overlooked.⁵⁴¹

Adaptability of Family Roles

Family roles in the black family are fluid and flexible, family members assume each other's roles based on circumstances. Adaptability of family roles developed out of

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁵³⁶ Robert Hill, *Strengths of Black Families* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1973), 5.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁵³⁹ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, 101.

⁵⁴⁰ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 8.

⁵⁴¹ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, 102.

economic necessity.⁵⁴² Mothers may have to work long hours, which causes fathers to assume the role and/or duties ascribed to the mother. Children may have to contribute to the household, thus taking on traditional parental roles. Fathers may have to work long hours, resulting in mothers assuming the role of the father. Several members of the black family often share decisions and tasks. Flexibility contributes to the strength and sustainability of the family and helps stabilize it in the event of unanticipated events or separation due to death, prolonged illness, or divorce.⁵⁴³ As opposed to findings of some scholars that black families have many matriarchal households, families are actually more equalitarian and their decision making is shared.⁵⁴⁴

Hill also states that simply because a household has a single parent does not mean that pathology exists. He suggests that this is the best example of adaptability in the black family.⁵⁴⁵ Marrying to gain a male head of household may be a healthy response to a particular social situation,⁵⁴⁶ but Hill reiterates that a wide range of functioning patterns exists in households headed by single mothers. Some one-parent households do function better than some two-parent households.⁵⁴⁷ Hill suggests that scholars be careful not to equate family structure with function. Once there is quality in function, the structure should not matter. Research to support the notion that many single-parent families are

⁵⁴² Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 11.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 11, 13.

⁵⁴⁵ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 14.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 14, 15.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

more cohesive than two-parent families exists, although it shows that such families tend to be economically disadvantaged.⁵⁴⁸

Hill found that because of the adaptability and flexibility of the black family, black males are not necessarily at a disadvantage to single-mother parenting. Due to shifting roles, black families tend to encompass extended family, even if there is no adult male in the household. Adult males from other households provide necessary role models who assist in raising male children.⁵⁴⁹ These extended family members, whether or not they are related, offer valuable assistance in the socialization process.

Achievement Orientation

Achievement orientation is an individual's belief and perception as to why he or she wishes to learn as a means to succeed.⁵⁵⁰ A person's achievement orientation encompasses his or her ability to set a goal and his or her level of determination to achieve it. African-Americans have historically had a strong predilection for achievement. Hill describes low-income black families as having strong achievement orientation.⁵⁵¹

Though many studies on black achievement orientation state that class often determines the achievement orientation of a person (middle-class and upper-class families have higher achievement orientation), Hill found that within the black community, a high proportion of middle-class students have college aspirations. Yet the

⁵⁴⁸ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, 110, 111

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵⁵⁰ Solmaz Aydin, Volkan Goksu, Sibel Gubuzoglu Yalmanci, and Sundus Yerdelen, "Relationship between High School Students' Achievement Goal Orientation and Academic Motivation for Learning Biology: A Path Analysis," *Education and Science* 39, no. 176 (2014): 437.

⁵⁵¹ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 2nd ed., 21.

majority of low-income students and their parents do as well. Often, low-income students attending college surpass middle-class students in their performance.⁵⁵²

According to a survey conducted by the American Council on Education, more than half of the freshmen attending historically black colleges and universities are from homes where the father did not complete high school or college. This means that the majority of black students in college do not come from middle-class families.⁵⁵³ Low-income parents sometimes pressure their children to strive for achievement. Southern single parents tend to push children toward high achievement. Based on Hill's reading, this negates most studies about black achievement orientation.

Strong Religious Orientation

Hill identifies strong religious orientation as a strength of black families. He notes that there was minimal empirical data available to support this premise when he wrote *Black Family Strengths*.⁵⁵⁴ However, there is historical evidence that black families have often used religion as a way to survive and a tool for advancement. Faith has helped black people psychologically for many years.⁵⁵⁵ African-American culture is especially spiritual.⁵⁵⁶ Religious culture in the black community and black churches was shaped by many African religious practices that the enslaved brought with them from

⁵⁵² Ibid., 23.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 23–24.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁵⁵ Cassandra Chaney, Derrick Jones, and Kris Marsh, "The Strengths of High-Achieving Black High School Students in a Racially Diverse Setting," *The Journal of Negro Education* 81, no. 1 (2012): 40.

⁵⁵⁶ Kelly Douglas and Ronald Hopson, "Understanding the Black Church: The Dynamics of Change," *Journal of Religious Thought* 56, no. 2 (2000): 96–97.

their homelands.⁵⁵⁷ That faith and those beliefs fused into religious practices in America. Rejection of the captors' religious ideals, which supported slavery, birthed the black American religious experience that continues to play a special role in black life.

During tumultuous times in black history, the black church was an ever-present help. It was a community and cultural institution on which black people could rely. Hill supports this premise by stating that the black church was responsible for the development of the first self-help societies for black people.⁵⁵⁸ The black church has done much to improve conditions for black people by forming other institutions to assist families, such as banks, low-income housing, insurance companies, schools, and orphanages.⁵⁵⁹ As a result, the black church became the social center of the black community and contributed to a strong religious orientation.⁵⁶⁰

The strong religious commitment of African-Americans is also evident in studies in which they were questioned about the role religion plays in their lives. A 1994 study revealed that 82% of black people polled said religion was important.⁵⁶¹ Black people are more likely to attend church compared to whites.⁵⁶² There are many faith-based organizations in the black community committed to improving quality of life.⁵⁶³

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁵⁵⁸ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, 135.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁵⁶⁰ Douglas and Hopson, "Understanding the Black Church," 97.

⁵⁶¹ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, 136.

⁵⁶² Matthew Dupre, Alexis Franzese, and Emilo Parrado, "Religious Attendance and Mortality: Implications for the Black-White Mortality Crossover," *Demography* 43, no. 1 (2006): 143.

⁵⁶³ R. Khari Brown, "The Connection between Worship Attendance and Racial Segregation Attitudes among White and Black Americans," *Religions* 2, (2011): 280.

Summary

Hill contends that the media is one of the reasons he decided to do his research.

In his follow-up book, *The Strengths of Black Families: Twenty-Five Years Later*, he states:

The reasons that I wrote my 1972 work continue to hold a generation later. First, I still believe that the depiction of black families in the media and in the social science literature is unbalanced. The typical portrayal focuses on the weakness or deficiencies of a disadvantaged minority of black families—with little or no consideration of the majority...Second, I was concerned that most stories on the black community in the media or research studies were interested in explaining why blacks fail and underachieve, and not why the majority of low-income blacks are able to achieve against the odds. These analyses rarely seek answers to such questions as why eight out of ten black families are not on welfare, why nine out of ten black adolescents do not have children out of wedlock, and why two out of three black males do not have contact with the criminal justice system.⁵⁶⁴ Balance and sensitivity have not been achieved by mainstream broadcast and print media. They have continued to devote disproportionate coverage to the negative features of black families or to extreme examples of dis-functionality.⁵⁶⁵

One of the greatest myths perpetuated in American society is that of the black single-parent household and its disorganization and brokenness. Hill notes and refutes studies conducted by other social scientists about the black family that did not consider the effects of social or economic environments. He mentions studies that stated single female head of households in black families had a cyclical, and not linear, pattern. The studies alluded to cultural conditions that have historically contributed to continuing the pattern of single-mother households; they were nothing new.⁵⁶⁶ Hill cautions researchers not to assume that a family is broken or disorganized because there is only one parent.

⁵⁶⁴ Hill, *Strengths of African American*, 1–2.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2, 3, 6.

He uses this scholarship as a foundation to build on the premise that we must look at the cultural strengths of families. For instance, there are single female heads of household who own businesses and are part of middle-class and upper-class socioeconomic groups.

Many scholars would agree that slavery destroyed the black family, but Hill challenges researchers to think otherwise. When studying the black family, it is important to consider environment and community. The black family should be studied in the context of the community's changing class structure, the roots of black poverty, and historical development within the black community. It is with this thinking that Hill decided to concentrate on positive attributes of the black family and determine what characteristics are present in making a black family strong. What made black families strong in antebellum America are the same characteristics that make them strong today.

Hill quotes Mary Berry and John Blassingame:

One of the most important sources of black family tradition was the antebellum free Negro community. Although haunted by poverty, the free black family was nevertheless strong. It was especially crucial in the socialization of children. Black children imbibed important lessons from their parents. As industrious and earnest Christians, parents stressed morality, the value of labor and education, and racial uplift. They held family devotional services and regularly took their children to church. If they were skilled craftsmen, they taught the trade to their sons. If not, black boys were frequently apprenticed to black or white artisans. Finally, and most important, black parents exemplified, in their own lives, the character traits they wanted their children to learn.⁵⁶⁷

Black families can be strong units headed by a single mother, a single father, or two parents. It all depends on how they function as a unit. Hill also uses Frazier's studies to support what he terms the adoption factor in black family strengths:

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

It appears that the delinquency (of children) does not come from broken homes (for example, “broken by the absence of a parent”) but from disorganized families. Thus it has been the grandmother who has held the generations together when fathers and mothers abandoned their offspring... The Negro grandmother has not ceased to watch over the destiny of the Negro families as they have moved in ever increasing number to the cities during the present century... However, figures cannot give us any conception of the grandmother, unawed and still with her ancient dignity, watching over her children in the strange world of the city.⁵⁶⁸

Black families maintained strong kinship ties more than most other rural or urban families by frequently taking care of paupers, elders, and orphans within their family networks.⁵⁶⁹

To study and understand the black family would require a researcher to look at a number of aspects, such as class, gender, and generational proclivities so as not to generalize.⁵⁷⁰ Despite variations among those within the black culture, its members still converge around issues caused by systematic racism and alienation from mainstream American cultural norms.⁵⁷¹ The enslaved Africans in America created families that fulfilled their need to survive. They functioned, but not totally, according to the norms of white society.⁵⁷² In an interview with the *Baltimore Sun* in 1997, Hill articulated that black families have ways of coping with life that can be useful to other Americans. He

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁷⁰ Robert Staples, “The Changing Black Family,” in *The Black Family; Essays and Studies*, 6th ed., Robert Staples, ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 5.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁷² Jualynne Elizabeth Dodson, “Conceptualizations and Research of African American Family Life in the United States: Some Thoughts,” in *Black Families*, 4th ed., Harriette Pipes McAdoo, ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 59.

stated, “America can learn some things from blacks other than their music... All of our families can learn from each other.”⁵⁷³

Black Families and the Propensity for Portrayal

When black families appear in the media, they are often depicted as either egalitarian or matriarchal, suggesting that black families deviate from traditional mainstream family structure. Specifically, they differ from white, middle-class American families that define the male as the head of the household.⁵⁷⁴ Moynihan describes the black family as characterized by a “tangle of pathology” and blames the problems of the black community on the “unstable black family.”⁵⁷⁵ The pathology of the black family was widely accepted in academia after Moynihan’s report and researchers began to focus largely on the pathology⁵⁷⁶ instead of the positive characteristics of the black family. The black family should not be regarded as a nexus of pathologies. Instead, it should be viewed as a subsystem of the larger society. It is an adaptive, absorbing, and resilient mechanism for its society and the socialization of its children.⁵⁷⁷

A nuclear family is defined as a household comprised of primary members (two parents and children, one parent is the head) with no other related or unrelated co-

⁵⁷³ James Bock, “Sociologist Touts Strengths of Black Families: He Lists Ethic, Kin Support Network, Religious Foundation,” *The Baltimore Sun*, July 7, 1997, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1997-07-07/news/1997188019_1_black-families-extended-family-single-parent-families.

⁵⁷⁴ Faustina Haynes, “Gender and Family Ideal: An Exploratory Study of Black Middle-Class Americans,” *Journal of Family Issues* 200, no. 21 (2000): 812.

⁵⁷⁵ Lois Bryant and Marilyn Coleman, “The Black Family as Portrayed in Introductory Marriage and Family Textbooks,” *Family Relations* 37, no. 3 (1988): 255.

⁵⁷⁶ McAdoo, *Black Families*, 56.

⁵⁷⁷ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 2nd ed., xviii.

resident.⁵⁷⁸ When the nuclear family is considered, the black family is often measured by the same definition, which is a culturally incorrect definition. In addition, the black family is confined to its bloodlines and to who contributes to the emotional and functional support of the family. Black families have various intersections that define it, and there are overlaps in location, function, blood ties, affiliations, shared values, and functional relations. These systems cross all these areas in life. Currently, the limitations in social science theory and methods force researchers to limit their focus to smaller parcels of the family unit they are observing.⁵⁷⁹ Andrew Billingsley defines the African-American family as follows:

As an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, formal adoption, informal adoption, marriage, or by appropriation sustained by a history of common residence in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures both internal and external to itself. Numerous interlocking elements come together, forming an extraordinarily resilient institution.⁵⁸⁰

Marriage between black people is not just between the couple, but is an interlocking of groups as the newlyweds embrace another set of kinfolk.⁵⁸¹

Research on African-American families normally happens from one of three vantage points. The strengths of the family are seen from a matriarchal (female head) perspective that is striving for the continuation of the generations and attention to kin. The second is to review the negative impacts of social ills and the impact of

⁵⁷⁸ Robert Hill, *Research on the African American Family: A Holistic Perspective* (Boston: William Monroe Trotter Institute, 1993), 101.

⁵⁷⁹ Allen and James, "Comparative Perspectives," 3.

⁵⁸⁰ Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 28.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

institutionalized racism. Alternatively, it studies the dysfunctionality of families affected by institutional racism.⁵⁸² Because the focus is directed almost entirely on the female-headed household, none of these approaches considers the contribution males make to the family and ignores some black family culture and values.⁵⁸³

A 1993 study led by Hill found that in social science research, the conventional treatment of black families tended not to include many other black family structures in America. Researchers, instead, still chose to focus on one subgroup—the single head of household.⁵⁸⁴ Research on African-American families often has a nuclear family bias. African-American kinship structures are usually ignored when considering black family function. The female-centered family, and how it functions and interacts with male kinship networks,⁵⁸⁵ is generally overlooked. Black families need study from a kin network perspective as opposed to the nuclear family perspective, because it considers both blood kin and non-blood kin. Both structures contribute to the social, emotional, and socioeconomic needs of all family members concerned.⁵⁸⁶ In order to understand black families, it is imperative to examine kinship networks and how they play into black families' lives.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸² Lora Lempert, "Other Fathers: An Alternative Perspective on African American Community Caring," in *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*, 6th ed., Robert Staples, ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 189.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and M. Belinda Tucker, "Trends in African American Family Formation: A Theoretical and Statistical Overview," in *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Implications*, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and M. Belinda Tucker, eds. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995.), 7.

⁵⁸⁵ Albert Black and Joseph Scott, "Deep Structures of African American Family Life: Female and Male Kin Networks," in *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*, 6th ed., Robert Staples, ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 232.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 234.

Variations of sex and marriage practices because of social conditions during enslavement continue to affect the lives of African-American families. Frazier identifies these variations as instability of marriage resulting from illegality (the enslaved could not legally marry), the characters and roles of black males promoted the perception that they were marginal and ineffective, and the dissolution of enslaved family stability owing to a status as agricultural chattel until industrial urbanization took place.⁵⁸⁸ Some black marriageable adults have been forced into family arrangements that are not traditional (e.g., husband, wife, and dependent blood children for whom the husband and/or father provides financially, while the wife and/or mother takes care of the home and children's social and emotional needs⁵⁸⁹). This type of family arrangement among black people has not always been prevalent.

Contrary to popular reports on the black family, during slavery and for a period after there were more traditional black families than non-traditional black families in America and it remained that way until the late 1950s.⁵⁹⁰ Due to economic stressors, many black families banded together to share economic resources. This mutual aid system created and maintained the family kin network and contributed to the extended kinship network.⁵⁹¹ Black family combinations can contain one generation or be multigenerational. There may be only a parent-child, or a parent-child-brother-nephew-grandmother-great-grandfather makeup to the family. To survive in this type of family

⁵⁸⁸ Staples, "The Changing Black Family," 23.

⁵⁸⁹ Black and Scott, "Deep Structures," 233.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

unit, authority figures from different generations may act collectively and exchange roles as needed.⁵⁹²

The current structure of the black family is the result of the need to adopt a strategy to meet the basic needs of its members.⁵⁹³ Collins states that it is black grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and sisters as other-mothers who take on the care of and responsibility for other women's children.⁵⁹⁴ However, she adds that this is not based on men being absent; they may be present and have defined roles and cultural significance in the black family.⁵⁹⁵ Like the other-mother, there are other-fathers who act as role models and mentors in the lives of other people's children.⁵⁹⁶ Discourse on the strengths of black families contributes to the identity of fluidity of the family lines in the black community, as well as extended families, thus contributing to the identity of strong kinship bonds as a black family strength.⁵⁹⁷

Instances of the relative male not being part of the family were the result historically of unemployment and the welfare system. As technology developed and changed the look of industrial and agricultural America, the jobs and skills needed to handle jobs changed. Black men, who were in the past working class and able to hold stable jobs in manufacturing, were displaced due to not having the skills to qualify for a job in new sectors.⁵⁹⁸ The welfare system, set up to aid low-income families, did not provide jobs. Due to its policies, the male could not be in the home nor could the head of

⁵⁹² Ibid., 234.

⁵⁹³ Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 35.

⁵⁹⁴ Lempert, "Other Fathers," 190.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 2nd ed., 2, 69, 71.

⁵⁹⁸ Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 139.

household make too much money. Welfare created one-parent homes in order for the mother to get monetary or food support for the family.⁵⁹⁹

There have been a number of studies conducted on the black family. Yet, Moynihan's report on the black family has received more attention and has influenced many other studies since its publication.⁶⁰⁰ His report, considered an important government document on the black family, implied that black families suffered from economic privation. It denoted that a shift was necessary in how the government dealt with scarcity and the effects of racism.⁶⁰¹ Moynihan shifted the blame for the condition of the black family onto the family itself, as opposed to considering the social structure of America.⁶⁰² He did not specify a plan for circumventing these issues, but it was widely assumed that strengthening the black family was most important,⁶⁰³ based on the information presented in the report.

In 1972, Hill recognized that a lot of unsubstantiated and false information about black people was being presented to the world. Moynihan's conclusion of black pathology was based largely on single-mother households⁶⁰⁴ (which constituted only 25% of the black race in 1965⁶⁰⁵) and was applied to all black families by the few scholars who studied black families.⁶⁰⁶ White social scientists who studied black life did so from a mainstream perspective. These studies did not include black social scientists nor did

⁵⁹⁹ Black and Scott, "Deep Structures," 232–233.

⁶⁰⁰ Mitchell-Kernan and Tucker, "Trends in African American Family," 7.

⁶⁰¹ Staples, "The Changing Black Family," 3.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ McAdoo, *Black Families*, 207.

⁶⁰⁵ William Wilson, "The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black Community," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 37.

⁶⁰⁶ McAdoo, *Black Families*, 57.

they include them in deconstructing the findings. As such, Hill saw an opportunity to study his own race from a black American perspective.

Hill, an African-American sociologist and professor, has done extensive work on the black family. Hill was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1938. His parents were domestic workers and his father left the home when Hill was an adolescent.⁶⁰⁷ Hill graduated from Boys High School in 1956, where he served on the student government, school paper, math club, and history club.⁶⁰⁸ Hill became the first person in his family to finish college.⁶⁰⁹ He graduated from City College of New York in 1960 with a degree in sociology. While there, he revived the campus' chapter of the NAACP and later became its president. Hill became a good friend of Malcolm X, who spoke to students there at his request.⁶¹⁰ He earned a Ph.D. in 1969 from Columbia University.

Hill worked as a social researcher for the National Urban League from 1969 to 1981. He has taught at various universities including Fordham, Princeton, University of Maryland, Howard University, University of Pennsylvania, and New York University.⁶¹¹ He has served on a variety of panels and committees pertaining to African Americas, including the United States Census Bureau, White House Council, and the National Academy of Sciences.⁶¹² Hill worked for the Bureau of Social Sciences Research from 1981 to 1986. From 1989 until 1998, he served as the research director for Morgan State

⁶⁰⁷ Robert Hill, interview by History Makers, August 24, 2004, <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/robert-b-hill-38>.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Bock, "Sociologist Touts Strengths," *The Baltimore Sun*.

⁶¹⁰ Hill, interview by History Makers, August 4, 2004.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Janet Dewart, ed., *The State of Black America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1989), ix-x.

University.⁶¹³ Hill has written a number of published works on discrimination, minorities, black families, youth, and public policy. While working as a social researcher for the National Urban League, he published his first book, *Strengths of Black Families*. The purpose of this book was to counter the negative report on black life and black stereotypes found in Moynihan's research.⁶¹⁴ Many scholars cite his works because they accentuate positive attributes of the black family rather than concentrate on its ills.

Hill released his book, *Strengths of Black Families: Twenty-five Years Later*, in 1997. The *Baltimore Sun* quoted him as saying, "America needs a more balanced view of black families." He believes that too much focus is given to the 20% of families who have issues, rather than the 80% who do not.⁶¹⁵ His collaborative work, *Research on African-American Families*, states that little attention has been given to the strengths of black families; more often, it is focused on its weakness. Proper assessment of black family function requires that strengths and weaknesses be studied.⁶¹⁶ Moreover, at the time that Hill wrote *Strengths of Black Families*, there were not many studies that defined or verified these strengths.⁶¹⁷ Hill argued that, in order to change the issues that exist for many African-Americans, the family needs strengthening through programs, resources, and policies that must be strength-based. The exposure of the strengths of black families will assist in perpetuating such aid, and even more so in future generations.⁶¹⁸ The model

⁶¹³ Robert Hill, interview by History Makers, August 24, 2002.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Bock, "Sociologist Touts Strengths," *The Baltimore Sun*.

⁶¹⁶ Hill, *Research on the African American Family*, 101.

⁶¹⁷ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 2nd ed., xviii.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

program to beget strong black families includes proving that strong black families do exist and changing the world's definition of a strong black family.

Families are essential for the transfer of wealth or debt. Social class inequality can be prevalent across generations because it perpetuates that family's socioeconomic position and affects formation. Black people, historically being property, could not have families unless owners gave them permission to do so. Black families initially struggled for strength and survival in this context. White American society accumulated intergenerational wealth, unavailable to the enslaved, placing themselves in advantageous positions across generations. This perpetuated a system of race and class perforation ensuring that a select group would maintain dominance, have the best opportunities, and benefit economically.⁶¹⁹

Black Americans have endured four major transitions as part of their experience. The first was capture and enduring the enslavement period. Cultural identification from many countries in Africa was lost and significantly redefined. This helped shape African-Americans into cultural, social, and biological hybrids of America and Africa. The second transition occurred after Emancipation. Due to the outcast status the newly freed slaves were given, they developed familial lines that included various members of their community.⁶²⁰ The third transition took place when blacks migrated to the north from the south, moving culturally, socioeconomically, and geographically from a rural

⁶¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, "Just Another American Story: The First Black First Family," *Qualitative Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2012): 128.

⁶²⁰ Allen and James, "Comparative Perspectives," 3.

agrarian folk society to a northern or western developed industrial society.⁶²¹ The fourth transition was desegregation in policies and practices in the United States. Scholars have considered the concept of the black family in terms of what was lost, rather than what has evidently remained—persistence and a long-standing contribution to the longevity of the African-American family.⁶²²

Hill suggests that society looks more at the nature of black people who love, marry, and have families in a world that has set the stage, made the props, and trained the actors to fail. Billingsley confirmed in Hill's book, *Strengths of Black Families*, that the media and scholars have instead chosen to focus on the problems that black families face, mainly because black people and black scholars had no hand in how blacks have been studied and portrayed.⁶²³ Hill pointed out in his *Baltimore Sun* interview that when the white poor are in the media, the cause of their maladies is mainly external, such as business closings or a change in technology. When poor black people are in the media, they are mainly poor due to internal issues such as a breakdown in values, self-destruction of the family, or poor work ethic.⁶²⁴ Hill suggests facilitating policies and programs that enhance the strengths of black families.⁶²⁵ As television is a great tool for learning when used responsibly, depictions of strong black families could be instrumental in promoting this premise.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 4.

⁶²² Allen and James, "Comparative Perspectives," 4.

⁶²³ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 2nd ed., vii.

⁶²⁴ Bock, "Sociologist Touts Strengths," *The Baltimore Sun*.

⁶²⁵ Hill, *Strengths of Black Families*, 2nd ed., xvii.

The Civil Rights Movement and Black Television Representation

Several factors contributed to the rise of positive portrayals of blacks on television. Walter White, a leader in the NAACP in the 1940s, was a strong supporter and activist in this effort. Scholar Thomas Cripps notes in his 2005 study of the first (and short-lived) NAACP Hollywood bureau in 1946, and the later Hollywood bureau of 2003, that White was most known for his efforts to have studio heads change the image of black people in movies.⁶²⁶ White took advantage of World War II, a time that touched the consciousness of liberal America where race was concerned.⁶²⁷ A statement made by historian Mary Ann Watson potentially sheds some light on why this period may have been paramount in launching the effort in preparation for what was to come. She states:

Since World War II, TV has been a reflection of the national character and the primary means by which Americans have defined themselves and each other... While social scientists grapple with the impact of television, viewers innately understood that TV was becoming the principle forum for national dialogue and that the medium was absorbing much of the socializing function from parents, teachers, and clergy. From the start, groups of citizens, particularly those marginalized in American culture wanted to have a say in their own portrayals on television. They intuited correctly the pictures of the world the new medium transmitted would be defining.⁶²⁸

In an unlikely partnership with the Office of War Information (the OWI had the job to prepare the nation for transition out of the war), White and the NAACP reminded its Hollywood desk leader of their shared interest in encouraging production of films with

⁶²⁶ Thomas Cripps, "Walter's Thing: The NAACP's Hollywood Bureau of 1946 – A Cautionary Tale," *Popular Film and Television* 33, no. 2 (2005): 117.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ Dates and Mascaro, "Introduction: African Americans in Film," 52.

more favorable depictions of people of color.⁶²⁹ Together, White and OWI leader Lowell Mellett encouraged Hollywood to make some changes for blacks in the spirit of nationalism following the war.⁶³⁰

According to scholar Stephen Vaughn in his recap of Ronald Reagan and his contributions to more dignified representations of blacks in Hollywood, beginning as early as the 1920s the NAACP advocated for more respectable representations of African-Americans in the media. Walter White led this charge and, in the 1940s, again urged producers to abandon black stereotypes as a means to circumvent misunderstandings of the Negro culture.⁶³¹ White led a campaign against stereotypical roles, but was unable to present a unified front because many black actors were opposed to his protest out of fear that it would mean the end of jobs for black performers. He had to rely heavily on white liberal supporters within the entertainment industry and was able to link with the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), then under the leadership of Ronald Reagan. Both organizations were able to agree that there needed to be dignified portrayals of black actors. However, the Guild was not willing to eliminate roles of servants for black actors.⁶³² Vaughn stated that the rift between White, black actors, and the Guild continued to widen. When White attempted to develop an NAACP Hollywood bureau as a consulting arm for black roles, employment, and involvement in entertainment, he was strongly challenged by black SAG members. However, Reagan continued to push the

⁶²⁹ Cripps, "Walter's Thing," 117.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Stephen Vaughn, "Ronald Reagan and the Struggle for Black Dignity in Cinema, 1937-1953," *The Journal of African American History* 87 (2002): 84.

⁶³² Ibid., 87, 88.

Guild to create anti-discrimination policies and develop positive portrayal and representation policies for black characters. He created the SAG Anti-Discrimination Committee. Soon, however, the committee dissolved due to internal conflicts and divisiveness among noted white actors of the time who said they were concerned that blacks would be hurt by the Guild if they continued to appeal to producers on behalf of Negroes.⁶³³ That was in 1947. Little activity on behalf of the Negro in Hollywood occurred until the early 1950s.⁶³⁴

Vaughn notes that in early 1952, Reagan and the Guild created the Negro Employment Committee, which convened a board meeting on race issues in Hollywood that summer. The meeting went well, though producers received the pleas rather coolly.⁶³⁵ There continued to be a lack of unity between SAG and the NAACP, but the SAG committee was able to make some small strides despite Hollywood insiders and key players often being reluctant. The board endorsed a statement on integration and employment for Negroes in entertainment to solicit support for the portrayal of blacks in roles that depict their real lives.⁶³⁶ Reagan joined forces with black actor William Walker, an *Amos and Andy* supporter who eventually became a SAG board alternate. Walker lobbied producers for more black roles and opportunities.⁶³⁷ The Screen Producers Guild accepted their pleas in 1953.⁶³⁸ However, this short increase in opportunities, too, was short-lived. Hollywood executives were more interested in where

⁶³³ Ibid., 88–89.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 90–91.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

the money came from and made decisions they felt would not hurt the box office. For them, race in Hollywood was not a moral issue.⁶³⁹

Though Reagan supported better treatment for black performers, he was also concerned about his rise to power in Hollywood. Liberal thinking might adversely affect his career.⁶⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Reagan's tenure as a SAG board member and his advocacy for the dignified portrayal of blacks and opportunities for black actors cannot be overlooked. His efforts most assuredly opened the door for the rise in black representation on television in the 1950s. By 1951, the NAACP Hollywood bureau was mostly defunct; White had lost the support of the OWI when, according to Cripps, Congress removed many of the liberal supporters of White, who worked at OWI, from the organization.⁶⁴¹ White had not gotten the results he had hoped for, and black stereotypes were in play.⁶⁴² Still, the early work of White and the NAACP Hollywood bureau helped provide opportunities for blacks in television. It also laid the groundwork for future NAACP and SAG campaigns concerning the Negro in Hollywood.⁶⁴³

Social scholar Stephen Vider states that black shows, such as *Amos and Andy* and *Beulah*, did appear on television in the 1950s. Even though the NAACP's earlier campaigns for more blacks in film did much to secure productions such as these, the organization led protests against these shows for their portrayal of blacks as buffoons and

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Cripps, "Walter's Thing," 120.

⁶⁴² Ibid., 123.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

maids, leading to their demise.⁶⁴⁴ It was not until the 1960s that networks took another risk on black cast shows. Even then, they paired them with white characters where they worked together toward some common goal.⁶⁴⁵ These shows included *I Spy* starring Bill Cosby as a police operative, and *Julia* starring Diahann Carroll as a widowed nurse. Both shows were criticized because they did not address the realities some felt most blacks faced. The producer of *Julia*, Hal Kanter, felt viewers did not want to be entertained with despair, agony, and poverty.⁶⁴⁶ Ironically, this is exactly what viewers began to tune in to due to mass media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement and its visibility on television is an example of how television can change the way people think. Television's coverage of the Movement placed the spectacle of protesters being gassed, beaten, and trampled in the faces of Northerners, who were complacent about the treatment of blacks.⁶⁴⁷ Participants and proponents of the movement exploited the modern communication technologies of the 1950s and 1960s for their needs.⁶⁴⁸ By the beginning of the 1960s, 58% of American households had television sets.⁶⁴⁹ Launching satellites into orbit allowed black protests to be viewed around the world, and enhanced the Movement's ability to affect the international arena.⁶⁵⁰ By the time the Civil Rights Movement in America began, blacks

⁶⁴⁴ Stephen Vider, "Sanford Versus Steinberg," *Transition*, 105 (2011): 24.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁴⁷ Mark Miller and Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America* (Southern Illinois University, 2003), xiii.

⁶⁴⁸ Aldon Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, (1999): 522.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 523.

had risen to new levels of political power. Northern blacks were given the right to vote, which was a political factor that contributed to the success of the Movement.⁶⁵¹

Television coverage of mass protests, physical attacks, arrests, and crime scenes viewed nationally and internationally pushed the experience of the participants and the plights of black people into the world's headlines. The more the protests were televised, the more the antagonists were exposed and provoked to use violent and sometimes deadly means to end the demonstrations.⁶⁵² Outrage at the treatment of blacks led others to join or develop their own protests and provoked foreign Cold War politicians to place pressure on America to end racist practices, as they were hesitant to do business with America based on what they were viewing.⁶⁵³ The Movement's visibility added to these factors and helped push the black agenda. The movement amplified its visibility on television and received the attention it needed to garner legislation to end discrimination and provide black Americans the right to vote.⁶⁵⁴

Media scholars Jannette Dates and Thomas Mascaro note that television was the chosen instrument of the revolution during the Movement.⁶⁵⁵ Another product of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was the increased importance of concerns about minorities on television, as well drew attention to discriminatory hiring practices at the networks. This led to an investigation of the impact of television on minority viewers.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 522.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 526.

⁶⁵³ Ibid., 522.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁵ Dates and Mascaro, "Introduction: African Americans in Film," 50.

⁶⁵⁶ Bradley Greeberg and Dana Mastro, "The Portrayal of Racial Minorities on Prime Time Television," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (2000): 690.

Primetime Black Programming

Television programming has not typically, or historically, been developed for the interest or entertainment of African-Americans. Programmers determine what airs in primetime and that choice is influenced by advertising dollars. Advertisers target a particular demographic of viewers who watch a show during that allotted time.

Television network executives and programmers define viewing audiences by race, class, gender, income, and age.⁶⁵⁷ The Broadcasters Audience Research Board collects information on television viewing and advertisers use that information to assist them in allocating advertising dollars.⁶⁵⁸ The data they collect denotes the number of people watching a specific channel at a certain time. This happens by reporting the number of households and people watching a program per advertising slot.⁶⁵⁹ Advertisers, who are aware of viewership during any time of the day, will gear advertising during those programs to influence the target audience.⁶⁶⁰

Advertisements and programming for primetime network viewers of major network television were geared toward a white audience.⁶⁶¹ The evidence for this is the dominance of white actors in television commercials. Black actors were not seen in commercials unless the advertisers wanted a black market.⁶⁶² Advertisers financially influence programming that major networks air during primetime when white audiences watch TV. It is therefore likely that major network primetime television was not

⁶⁵⁷ Gray, *Watching Race*, 58.

⁶⁵⁸ Adrian Palmer, *Introduction to Marketing: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 423.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁰ Hunt, *Channeling Blackness*, 20.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*

developed with African-Americans in mind. The systematic exclusion of strong, positive black representation in television media was evident.⁶⁶³

African-American visibility on television started to change significantly in the 1980s. The African-American culture chosen to be portrayed on television was pivotal. Television industry players determined that quality shows appealing to specific audiences would be profitable.⁶⁶⁴ Representation of African-Americans on television shifted and suddenly blacks were featured in more commercial television than in past decades.⁶⁶⁵ When the FOX network launched in 1986, more niche programming appeared for black people. Black major network television audiences were replacing white audiences that had moved on to watching cable television. Black audiences became the key demographic overall in network viewership.⁶⁶⁶ FOX's all black lineup, geared specifically to black audiences, made FOX a viable major network competitor and required marketing to the historically ignored black audience.⁶⁶⁷ Thus, African-American representation on television increased significantly. FOX was airing the largest representation of black characters in television history. By 1995, a quarter of FOX's market was African-American.⁶⁶⁸ Once FOX made its mark as one of the top networks in the industry, it dropped many of its black shows. Warner Brothers (WB) and United

⁶⁶³ Berry, "Black Family Life," 235.

⁶⁶⁴ Gray, *Watching Race*, 58.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁶⁶ Zook, *Color by FOX*, 5.

⁶⁶⁷ Glascock, "Gender, Race, and Aggression," 93.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Paramount Network (UPN) picked up where FOX stopped. WB was geared more toward teens, and UPN was tailored more toward blacks.⁶⁶⁹

By fall 2001, UPN's schedule included a two-hour primetime block of comedies oriented toward black American life. White television programming still dominated the airways with at least two hours every night on nearly every channel.⁶⁷⁰ Series pertaining to the workplace were more realistic and perceptive when black characters were in the cast, and this invigorated the primetime schedule. Shows that captured old-fashioned sitcoms attracted African-American viewers. Black style, glamour, and sexuality were ushered into the viewing public's living rooms. These years gave rise to the black power broker in Hollywood, and the black family was at the forefront.⁶⁷¹

Positive portrayals of black family life emerged on television. The more popular shows provoked quite a bit of conversation about the black family, with *The Cosby Show* as the main impetus.⁶⁷² It was the first to depict an African-American upper-middle class family, where both parents were present. The spouses displayed a loving and fun relationship and operated as equals (as much as possible) in running the household. The children were respectful and the family taught and emphasized high achievement-oriented values.⁶⁷³

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), 363.

⁶⁷² Linda Fuller, *The Cosby Show: Audiences Impact and Implications* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 136.

⁶⁷³ Berry, "Black Family Life," 237.

Reagan Won and Television Turns

Hunt's study on television content notes that television in the 1970s confronted urban life and its realities. White producers controlled these shows, however, and their audiences were white.⁶⁷⁴ The 1980s were pivotal for blacks in television as black creators of television productions became more prevalent. However, the positive characters portrayed on these shows resonated with regressive racial politics.⁶⁷⁵ White audiences liked the programs and deduced that because black shows were now in their homes that issues of race no longer existed. Additionally, even though whites felt more secure about racial equality by watching a successful black family on television, they still supported ending social programs designed to combat racism that had existed since before the civil rights era.⁶⁷⁶

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, television seemed obsessed with violence and sex. Television historian Eric Barnouw notes that a number of cable systems were thriving on pornographic programs and other shows that major networks would not dare air. The wives of several senators and state representatives, along with organizations like the Moral Majority, rallied to demand a change in programming with threats of boycotts.⁶⁷⁷ Barnouw states that although many viewers felt the same as those that opposed violence and sex on television, the number one show on television in the 1980s was *Dallas*, a

⁶⁷⁴ Darnell Hunt, "Black Content, White Control," in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Darnell Hunt, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 270.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁷ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Revolution of American Television*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 482.

show filled with sex and violence.⁶⁷⁸ As America prepared for a new president, the outcry against sex and violence on television, along with family issues relating to sex education and abortion rights, the voting population seemed to desire a president they believed could restore values.⁶⁷⁹ Many believed Ronald Reagan to be that president.

Ronald Reagan's career in entertainment spanned over 40 years. Prior to his election as governor of California, some of his accomplishments included being a noteworthy movie star, radio personality, president of the Screen Actors Guild, and spokesperson for the General Electric Theater. It was during his stint as the General Electric Theater spokesperson that he became a conservative, adopting the views of the corporation.⁶⁸⁰

During his campaign for president, Reagan's advertising efforts and debating issues mirrored the themes he promoted at General Electric, including tax cuts, deregulation of businesses, and reductions in taxpayer-financed social services.⁶⁸¹ Welfare programs were on the chopping block if he was to be elected. Reagan saw social service programs as the reason taxpayers were paying too much. He failed to note that unemployment, inflation, and collapsing local economies played a role.⁶⁸² When Reagan debated the issues, though his answers were insufficient, the American public seemed to like the way he responded.⁶⁸³ Reagan was elected president in part due to his television

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 482–483.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 484.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 485.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 486.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

campaign and persona.⁶⁸⁴ Always one to prefer telling stories to making policies,⁶⁸⁵

Reagan often tied cultural and political expressions together to make his points.

Following the release of hostages from Iran, he approached a microphone and tested it by saying he was “glad that he watched the movie Rambo [because] now [he] would know what to do the next time a hostage situation happened.”⁶⁸⁶

Presidential historian Gil Troy states that Reagan was strongly against public policies that helped the poor. Yet, because of his commitment to traditionalism and individualism, he actually boosted issues and the social and cultural endeavors he sought to demolish.⁶⁸⁷ Teen suicide increased, the number of families in poverty increased, and the destruction of the family worsened. Americans became used to the problems instead of trying to fix them.⁶⁸⁸

Americans who supported Reagan accepted his philosophies. Reagan backed dismantling social programs created during the New Deal. The tone of America changed.⁶⁸⁹ The 1970s were largely about social programs for the poor. The 1980s valued excess. Americans moved from idealism to materialism.⁶⁹⁰ The social program-fighting baby boomers of the 1960s were now the capitalist leaders of the 1980s.⁶⁹¹ The

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 487.

⁶⁸⁵ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 11.

⁶⁸⁶ Martin, *The Other Eighties*, 78.

⁶⁸⁷ Troy, *Morning in America*, 17.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 118.

1980s was a decade about the individual, devoid of any sense of social or cultural revolution.⁶⁹² Americans became obsessed with pursuing personal pleasure.⁶⁹³

Role models and personal identities were determined by how much a person spent, where they made their purchases, and where they spent their leisure time.⁶⁹⁴ The baby boomers went from feeling strongly about social issues and community endeavors to pursuing wealth and success.⁶⁹⁵ Marketing and advertising products followed demand and preferences. Television advertisers paid more to advertise during the time a certain show aired. Products desired and purchased by the most people were advertised during primetime hours. Media scholar Joseph Turow says that media advertising took into account the lifestyles of a particular audience, the type of home they might live in, the kind of car they drive, how many vacations they took last year and where they went, and what they do in their leisure time.⁶⁹⁶

Bradford Martin, in his book *The Other Eighties*, speaks about the change in direction Hollywood took in its entertainment products. He states that audiences were hungry for something more elevated and real, something with more quality. Films being released in the 1980s were made in a manner that ensured cross-marketability (that is, they were highly marketable and would guarantee a sequel) and ensured great financial returns.⁶⁹⁷ Films like *E.T.*, *Superman*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *Ghostbusters* were the

⁶⁹² Ibid., 119.

⁶⁹³ Ibid.,

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁶⁹⁶ Joseph Turow, *Media Today: An Introduction to Mass Communications*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 541.

⁶⁹⁷ Martin, *The Other Eighties*, 78–79.

types of films garnering the greatest success. Nevertheless, audiences and a new generation of producers were looking for creations that had significance and meaning.

Films began to look different in the 1980s, and Martin uses the movie *Platoon* as an example. Director Oliver Stone's intention was that it be a real depiction of Vietnam. His critics said he had accomplished his goal. Before *Platoon*, *Rambo* had shaped the ideal of what a soldier should be—hard-bodied and invulnerable. *Platoon* changed that ideal with its real-life depictions of soldiers. Viewers who had served in Vietnam confirmed that it was an accurate portrayal. Those who were considering enlisting in the military were influenced to make another career choice.⁶⁹⁸ The film provided context for the US presence in Central America by reminding policymakers and legislators about the repercussions of war.⁶⁹⁹

Martin offered other examples where Hollywood began to make changes toward more relevant films that addressed social issues. Stone's film *Wall Street* exposed the financial world in America and highlighted corporate crime, as well as cultural, social, and economic discontent at opposite ends of the spectrum.⁷⁰⁰ Shortly after the release of *Wall Street*, a real-life Gordon Gekko was arrested for insider trading.⁷⁰¹

In 1989, Michael Moore made a documentary about the closing of the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan and its effects on those who lived there. The movie *Roger and Me* showed how homelessness became an issue and how crime rose significantly, while the middle-class and upper-class continued their parties and golf

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 79–80.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

games as though nothing was happening.⁷⁰² Though some critics argued that the satire was not true, other critics found it valuable.

Reaganomics, known for keeping the rich in power and discarding the poor, was exposed in film for all to see its affects in business and class struggles. The films offered another point of view. Audiences in Russia watched these films following the end of Communism and many felt they were an example of what could happen if they chose to embrace capitalism.⁷⁰³ Martin is confirming with these examples that film content is important for social change and paramount in influencing feelings and the decisions that viewers make. Such as it was with film, so it was with television. The way a production was framed can make a difference. The Carter years before Reagan promoted a liberal rebellion against authority and conformity to the conservative rebellion against big government and high taxes.⁷⁰⁴ Reagan's cultural politics and style of governing were all about pursuing happiness at any cost.⁷⁰⁵

Troy states that in the 1980s, television became more fragmented but still concentrated.⁷⁰⁶ The three major networks began to have competition from cable networks. The yuppie generation (those young Americans during the Reagan era with a predilection for consuming things and wealth, as opposed to living a frugal life.⁷⁰⁷) began to set the standard for the culture and determine what was desirable as good television

⁷⁰² Ibid., 84–85.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁰⁴ Troy, *Morning in America*, 14.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., 122.

viewing.⁷⁰⁸ Thanks to President Reagan and the way he persuaded his audiences and incorporated cultural changes into his messages, the media took notice.⁷⁰⁹ Art tends to imitate life. Although the Reagan era began with a growing economy and greater patriotism, it was also a time of uncontrolled drug use, ghettoization, crime, failing schools, ineffective policies, superficiality, and the breakdown of the family.⁷¹⁰

The 1980s rendered the socioeconomic status of black people an informative issue. During this period, black families were not easily in a position to purchase homes or redress educational inequities, but many refused to give up. Martin notes that grassroots community organizers and leaders put together programs to serve the urban underclass and assist them in employment, housing, education, and healthcare.⁷¹¹ In the media, these issues and efforts to promote them went unnoticed, partly because media owners were not interested.⁷¹² In the 1980s, over 95% of those in positions of power in media were white. Instead of portraying positive African-American experiences, they decided to glamorize miscreant life in the inner city.⁷¹³ This reduced the visibility of prolific and change-agent African-American leaders. As Martin states, black life was left to be conveyed to the world by feminist rendering and rappers.⁷¹⁴

However, as Reagan had proven, politics was a viable means with which to promote community-organizing activities. From black mayors running for office to black

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁷¹¹ Martin, *The Other Eighties*, 122.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Ibid., 123.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

candidates running for president, the media seemed to pay attention.⁷¹⁵ Other African-Americans began to take the opportunity to use the cultural arena as a platform, not only to pursue political aspirations but also to present an abundance of agendas.⁷¹⁶ In spite of systematic exclusion and selective framing of black life in the media, some black people were able to pursue the means for a better life. These black people and families began to appear on television in the 1980s. African-American artists and image-makers rejected the stereotype of the pathological underclass and desired to restructure their positions, conditions, and communities.⁷¹⁷ Television was the mechanism for black voices to be heard.⁷¹⁸ Through television, African-American culture and its unique experiences were seen as negotiable as opposed to assumed.⁷¹⁹

President Reagan and his reforming of America in the 1980s influenced the direction television went in the 1990s.⁷²⁰ The era of Reagan resulted in opulence, indulgence, slavery to fads, and extreme conservatism.⁷²¹ It also produced a major recession, rises in social problems, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the stock market crash of 1987.⁷²² Reagan's approach to the presidency was not hands-on and his leadership of the nation received criticism as anti-government, which contributed to Americans' disdain of government.⁷²³

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., 124, 126, 128, 137, 139.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., xvi.

⁷¹⁸ Zook, *Color by FOX*, 1–2.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁷²⁰ Troy, *Morning in America*, 326.

⁷²¹ Ibid., 322.

⁷²² Ibid.

⁷²³ Ibid.

America had become a hodgepodge of mass production and standardization, a society addicted to show business, specifically television.⁷²⁴ The entertainment industry during Reagan's presidency saw a rise in both accessibility and consumption,⁷²⁵ and as such new shows geared toward different demographics were created. The Reagan era was responsible for developing the world's largest middle-class democracy.⁷²⁶ *The Cosby Show* was characteristic of the Reagan years: politically correct and a vision of wealth.⁷²⁷ Scholar Michele Hilmes notes that *The Cosby Show* is credited with reinvigorating family-centered television sitcoms. It made the middle-class African-American family something new to the white-only television tradition of the sitcom.⁷²⁸ *The Cosby Show* seemed to portray the wish for an American family free from racial and economic struggles that instead focused on family concerns.⁷²⁹ The issue of race was rarely discussed.⁷³⁰

By the beginning of the 1990s, the United States had been "Reaganized" politically and culturally.⁷³¹ After the Reagan Administration, television took another turn. Troy writes that America embraced bestselling books that depicted homey, simplistic life in affirming parables.⁷³² Troy also notes that at the beginning of the 1990s, which marked the end of the Reagan era, America had begun to embrace a wide range of

⁷²⁴ Ibid., 323.

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 331.

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., 328.

⁷²⁸ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 308.

⁷²⁹ Ibid., 309.

⁷³⁰ Ibid.

⁷³¹ Troy, *Morning in America*, 205, 322, 323, 326.

⁷³² Ibid., 326.

social identities as indicated in the types of television shows that were popular.⁷³³

Roseanne, a show about a white family, was indicative of the 1990s because it emphasized the lifestyles and struggles of Americans affected by the income gap between the poor and the rich.⁷³⁴ Shows like *Roseanne* began to beat out *The Cosby Show* in ratings, but both proved to be indicative of identities Americans now embraced.⁷³⁵

Hilmes states that *Roseanne* embraced the struggles for the working-class family in America and brought into question middle-class virtues, starting by allowing the household to be dominated by an overweight, loud white woman who was different from Claire Huxtable.⁷³⁶

Unlike the Huxtables in *The Cosby Show*, whose home was impressive and indicative of an upper-middle class family, Rosanne's home was older and untidy, but provided shelter for her family and their chaotic lives.⁷³⁷ The show addressed many of the issues other shows refused to tackle, including issues of money and American families not having enough of it. It was a stimulating show, and it marked the end of consumer-oriented television sparked by the early 1980s.⁷³⁸ *Roseanne* and the economic condition of her fictional TV family portrayed the damage left behind by the Reagan era.

Politically, economically, and socially things could not have been worse when the George H.W. Bush Administration had to pay the bills left behind by the Reagan era.

Hilmes states that following the abundance of the Reagan era, Bush had to determine

⁷³³ Ibid., 326.

⁷³⁴ Ibid., 328.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., 326.

⁷³⁶ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 309.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

how to fix the problems that tax cuts and heavy defense spending left in their wake: poverty, drugs, disease, and an unprecedented national debt.⁷³⁹ Troy states that though the Bush administration continued the efforts of Reagan's return-to-the-1950s cultural platform, Bush attempted to rekindle America's faith in government.⁷⁴⁰ America seemed to welcome Bush's presidency with the hope that there would be prosperity, peace, and a kinder decade than the Reagan years.⁷⁴¹ The economic collapse of the Reagan era resulted in an attempt at more controlled spending and modest living.

Troy notes that the need for Americans to spend modestly and operate with a moral agenda⁷⁴² was reflected in television programming. The changing leisure world of America that Reagan created in the 1980s and ushered into the 1990s had its inhabitants addicted to television.⁷⁴³ Additional television networks became solid competition for the three major networks.⁷⁴⁴ Four or five networks serviced television before 1975. By the end of the 1980s, there were more than 20. By 1985, cable television reached about 50% of homes.⁷⁴⁵ In the years prior to 1985, the Big Three TV networks shared over 90% of all viewing audiences. By 1985, their combined total viewing audience share was less than 75%.⁷⁴⁶ However, network executives found they could increase the amount they charged advertisers because their networks already had a proven record of sustainability and a strong distribution base in local affiliates that were well-established

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 280.

⁷⁴⁰ Troy, *Morning in America*, 324, 323.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 327.

⁷⁴² Ibid.

⁷⁴³ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 326.

⁷⁴⁵ Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 251.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., 251.

and maintained loyal viewership despite cable's inroads.⁷⁴⁷ Major networks were still viable because they remained the only place where a local viewer's community news and concerns were reflected and retained in a strong local market base.⁷⁴⁸

The technological changes that occurred also affected television programming. In addition to bigger television sets, camcorders became an item in high demand.⁷⁴⁹ The era of reality television, which peeks into the lives of ordinary people, began at this time with *America's Funniest Home Videos*.⁷⁵⁰ The 1980s also prepared America for the rise of black representation in the media. During the 1980s, black people became more visible within popular culture. Troy notes that during the 1980s, Michael Jackson was on top of the music world, Jessie Jackson ran for President, Oprah Winfrey became an American icon, and Bill Cosby revived the television sitcom.⁷⁵¹ In addition, the first black Miss America was crowned.⁷⁵² African-Americans became a part of the consumer pool that television advertisers and creators wanted.

The 1980s saw a significant rise in black programming as a whole, especially with the emergence of Black Entertainment Television, which began in 1979 as a television station owned by African-American Robert Johnson. In addition to a rise in black representation on television, those stations that ran black-cast programming also rose in popularity, such as FOX, UPN, and the WB.⁷⁵³ Though these stations were not owned or

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., 298.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., 327.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁵² Ibid., 118.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., 295.

operated by African-Americans, they exhibited heavy representation of blacks.⁷⁵⁴ In the 1990s, black people became the show runners of network programs at new stations that were on the rise.⁷⁵⁵

Black Families on Television

Studies have shown that black people watch more television than any other race.⁷⁵⁶ There are some explanations as to why this is true. Television did not lash out at African-Americans with hostility the way print media had since the birth of newspapers and magazines. During integration, television offered blacks some insight on the lives of white society that they may not have otherwise seen. Black people had few outlets to be safely entertained.⁷⁵⁷ Television could be viewed in the safety of the home.

Early entertainment genres customarily ignored people of color, providing the viewers with a worldview that blacks were not equal to whites. People of color were stereotyped. Negative depictions of the black family endured for many years and media leaders still held beliefs about blacks that were inaccurate or stereotypical.⁷⁵⁸ Many beliefs existed since slavery and Reconstruction, social and economic constraints, and Jim Crow laws, all of which followed blacks during the Great Migration. The result of these beliefs about blacks ensured that the role as victim of discrimination would be

⁷⁵⁴ Zook, *Color by FOX*, 102-103.

⁷⁵⁵ Gregory Adamo, *African Americans in Television*, 4.

⁷⁵⁶ The Nielsen Company, "Total Audience Report: Quarter 1," June 23, 2015, 7, <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2015-reports/total-audience-report-q1-2015.pdf>.

⁷⁵⁷ Berry, "Black Family Life," 238.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

visible in housing, education, and employment.⁷⁵⁹ Where the black family was concerned, the media contributed to the stereotype of the crumbling black family by supporting the premise that black families are unstable. In addition to teaching the viewer that there is no stable family life for blacks, it also supported the failure to provide examples of what a stable black family life looks like, or if it even exists. The fight for civil rights that black Americans undertook played a significant role in how black people were viewed and in the rise of black representation in television.

A 1977 study found that African-American situation comedies such as *Good Times*, *That is My Mama*, and *Sanford & Son* had characters characterized as stereotypes, having traits associated with African-Americans. Those traits were based on assumptions that black people are fun loving, clownish, happy-go-lucky, and poor. This premise supports a few other studies, noted by scholars, of a positive correlation between comedies and African-American culture. Black people viewed mainstream television as a venue that communicated with the larger African-American community.⁷⁶⁰ The black audience gets a different meaning from black television shows because as members of the culture they understand cultural connotations and familiar conversations.⁷⁶¹ These shows were considered a protest (of sorts) by their creators against the stigma placed on the African-American family structure and its purported weakness and failure.⁷⁶²

Television families featuring black families often show them isolated from other families. The wife is regularly in conflict with the husband, and females are frequently in

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁰ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 7.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶² Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals," 267.

the dominant role. Conflict is prevalent if siblings are depicted. Interestingly, if black characters are shown with white characters the black characters tend to dominate the show and are more likely to display socially valued characteristics.⁷⁶³ Using the comedy genre, the black family displays unity regardless of conflicts.

The African-American family life has been used in programming for decades. One of the earliest programs about black family life was *Julia*, which aired in 1969. *Julia* was about a nurse who was also a single mother of a young son. The show was one of the first family shows that evoked scholarly discourse about the authenticity of its portrayal.⁷⁶⁴ It was accused of being a whitewashed show because her character was unbelievably positive.⁷⁶⁵

Shows that followed *Julia* depicted the black family with realistic dialogue such as *Sanford and Son* (1972), *Good Times* (1974), *That is My Mama* (1974), *The Jeffersons* (1975), *The Cosby Show* (1985), *227* (1985), *Frank's Place* (1987), *South Central* (1995), and *Under One Roof* (1995).⁷⁶⁶ Each of these shows had a message and highlighted different beliefs and values. Though some portrayed black family survival against the odds, others spotlighted strength and solidarity in the midst of stereotypical behavior. *Sanford and Son*, for instance, portrayed Fred as dishonest and lazy. Aunt Esther was always trying to emasculate Fred Sanford. Both were stereotypical

⁷⁶³ Berry, "Black Family Life," 237.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁷⁶⁵ Melbourne Cummings, "The Changing Image of the Black Family on Television," *Journal of Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (1988): 78.

⁷⁶⁶ Berry, "Black Family Life," 236.

characteristics.⁷⁶⁷ However, there were instances when Fred and Esther depicted solidarity as family members, although they were not blood relatives. An episode shows Fred's friend, Big Money Grip, coming from St. Louis to visit, and he tells Fred that Lamont is his son. Esther and Fred unite to defend Fred's wife's (and Esther's sister's) good name.⁷⁶⁸ There are a number of episodes where Fred and Esther come together to help each other out of a jam or help each other advance. One example is when Fred helps Esther prepare and run for the Mrs. Watts Business Woman Awards, and they agree to split the winnings.⁷⁶⁹ Another is when Fred pretends to be Woody, Esther's husband, when she and Woody have an adoption agency visit scheduled, and Woody is too drunk to participate. Fred stands in, the plan fails, and they are exposed. He tells the adoption agent how good Esther and Woody are. Fred's explanation of how they would make good parents results in the adoption agent creating a plan for their improvement and another opportunity for a review.⁷⁷⁰ By the mid-1970s and on into the 1990s, positive portrayals emerged where husband and wife were present and relationships between family members was respectful, equal, and loving.⁷⁷¹

According to scholar David Joselit, the rise in African-Americans viewers in the 1980s contributed to a rise in positive portrayals. As affluent viewers left network television for cable programming, network executives developed programs that would

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., 237.

⁷⁶⁸ "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Sanford and Son*, season 3, episode 14, directed by Jack Shea, aired January 4, 1974 on CBS, accessed July 20, 2015. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0694117/>.

⁷⁶⁹ "My Fair Esther," *Sanford and Son*, directed by James Shelton, season 5, episode 9, aired November 14, 1975 on CBS, accessed July 20, 2015. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0694120/>.

⁷⁷⁰ "Aunt Esther has a Baby," *Sanford and Son*, directed by Alan Rafkin, season 6, episode 10, aired December 3, 1976 on CBS, accessed July 20, 2015. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0694064/>.

⁷⁷¹ Berry, "Black Family Life," 237.

appeal to the African-American viewer.⁷⁷² To ensure that they were able to hold on to its remaining white viewers, they incorporated a conservative identification in which blackness is evident but is also interpreted and presented in a domesticated form.⁷⁷³ The beginning of black nuclear families on television in roles that were not historically typical got its start in the least likely of places.

The Bigot Who Paved the Way for Black Family Television Shows

Early African America television comedies did not address the black experience.⁷⁷⁴ Most were stereotypical depictions based on the interpretations of others.⁷⁷⁵ However, in the 1970s new comedic programs were introduced that depicted situations representing the sentiment of the era. CBS and a group of programmers and producers decided to undertake the task of overhauling the image of television in America. Two independent television companies were selected to accomplish this task, Mary Tyler Moore Productions and Tandem/Tuchus Affen Tisch (TAT) Productions. Producer and director Norman Lear was an executive at TAT.⁷⁷⁶ Lear campaigned for good television.⁷⁷⁷ The shows he produced provoked nationwide discussions about the representation of race and racism. His visions were significant and influential in the

⁷⁷² David Joselit, "The Video Public Sphere," *Art Journal* 59, no. 2 (2000): 47.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁷⁴ Jannette Dates, "Commercial Television," in *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, 2nd ed., William Barlow and Jannette Dates, eds. (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993), 284.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁷⁷⁶ Kirsten Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 1 (2000): 46.

⁷⁷⁷ Erin Mock, "'The Soap Opera Is a Hell of an Exciting Form': Norman Lear's *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and the 1970s Viewer," *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 2 (2013): 113.

history of television race representation.⁷⁷⁸ His programs fell into the category of relevance programming and they responded to the social and political climate of their time.⁷⁷⁹

Following the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the moon landing, and the Vietnam War executives and programmers wanted television they felt was relevant to the changes happening in America.⁷⁸⁰ The color of television began to change, as did the clothes, hair, and introduction of characters. Style and roles began to cross sexual and racial lines, and the programs themselves began to sound different. The language of shows began to include racial epithets that had formerly been a broadcasting taboo. The show most noted for ushering in this change in look and language was *All in the Family*.⁷⁸¹ Lear's creation was meant to put the racial ills of America at the forefront and provide a platform for all races to laugh together.⁷⁸²

All in the Family became Lear's best-known product and represented a form of activism using television.⁷⁸³ It became a mirror of society.⁷⁸⁴ Thanks to television journalism of the late 1960s, the atrocities of the Vietnam War, the beatings of blacks and civil rights supporters in the South, Nixon and Watergate, and the riots of blacks in major cities nationwide came into the living rooms of the world.⁷⁸⁵ However, other than what was reported in television news, sitcoms and dramas were not providing commentary or

⁷⁷⁸ Kirsten Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance," 46.

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁸⁰ Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 430.

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 432.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, 433.

⁷⁸³ Mock, "The Soap Opera Is a Hell," 113.

⁷⁸⁴ Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Inc., 2007), 4.

⁷⁸⁵ Miller and Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America*, xiv.

even subtly addressing these events. But *All in the Family* did. The show proved to be a reflection of the times and offered a glimpse at the conversations against civil rights that were possibly taking place in the homes of those who watched the events of those turbulent times. Archie Bunker was the epitome of a racist and sexist who continually displayed ignorance of cultural differences, and he was always challenged by his feminist daughter, Polish son-in-law, humanist wife, and later by his black neighbors.⁷⁸⁶

Lear's road to *All in the Family* was not easy. Norman Lear was born in 1922 in New Haven, Connecticut to a Jewish securities broker and a homemaker. He attended Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts, but dropped out to join the Air Force during World War II.⁷⁸⁷ After leaving the Air Force, Lear got a job in public relations in New York. Lear moved to Los Angeles, in 1949, and began working in television as a writer for a number of shows, including *The Colgate Hour*⁷⁸⁸ and *The Martin and Lewis Show*.⁷⁸⁹ He partnered with fellow producer and writer Bud Yorkin and created Tandem Productions in 1959, which produced several movies.

Lear and Yorkin purchased the American rights to a British TV show, *Till Death Do Us Part*, in 1970.⁷⁹⁰ It was rewritten to mirror Lear's upbringing with his father, who was a bigot.⁷⁹¹ The initial pitch of the show based on this Brit-com was *Those Were the Days*. ABC rejected it, but CBS showed interest in the project, which became *All in the*

⁷⁸⁶ Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies* (University Press of Kansas, 2004), 69.

⁷⁸⁷ *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, Vol. 19, s.v., "Norman Lear."

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁹ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 5.

⁷⁹⁰ *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, Vol. 19, s.v., "Norman Lear."

⁷⁹¹ Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 4–5.

Family and began airing in 1971.⁷⁹² Lear's *All in the Family* served as the impetus for a dynasty of shows that he proclaimed were entertainment with something to say.⁷⁹³ It was also the most controversial show ever aired and considered groundbreaking television that upset the traditional non-offensive situation comedies regularly seen at that time.⁷⁹⁴

Television cultural researcher Sean Campbell, who completed extensive research on Norman Lear's sitcoms, notes that Lear was tired of the perfect television family. His own family was far from what could be considered normal and he felt his father was like Archie Bunker.⁷⁹⁵ Archie Bunker, the lead character, was a racist, boorish bigot.⁷⁹⁶ He openly used racist language and had no problem letting anyone know what he believed.⁷⁹⁷ His purpose was to display an example of America's concerns, frailties, and prejudices in a comedic light.⁷⁹⁸ The co-stars' purpose was to prove him wrong by the end of each episode. The sources of his ridicule did not let Archie get away with expressing his ideas without a good debate.⁷⁹⁹

Edith, Archie's wife, was the stereotypical homemaker. She demonstrated patience and docility in order to be married to a person like Archie.⁸⁰⁰ She got along with everyone and made friends easily. She often tripped up Archie with her innocent harangues about trivial things or her political or social naiveté.⁸⁰¹ Archie and Edith had

⁷⁹² Ibid., 7.

⁷⁹³ Richard Corliss, "Happy Days Are Here Again," *Film Comment* 15, no. 4 (1979): 54.

⁷⁹⁴ Ross, *Black and White Media*, 93.

⁷⁹⁵ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 5.

⁷⁹⁶ Ross, *Black and White Media*, 93.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁸ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 11.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., 37.

one daughter, Gloria, who lived in their home with husband Mike Stivic, a college student who constantly bumped heads with Archie and always attempted to encourage him to see the world more liberally.⁸⁰²

Mike Stivic's good friend, Lionel Jefferson, a black man whose family owned a local drycleaner, often sarcastically participated in conversations with Archie to make his racist and ignorant comments seem totally absurd and unfounded.⁸⁰³ Louise and George Jefferson were Lionel's parents, and they also participated in exchanges with Archie to help the world see how horrible his ideals were.⁸⁰⁴ George was just as anti-white as Archie was anti-black, anti-Asian, anti-Hispanic, anti-Italian, anti-Jewish, homophobic, and sexist.⁸⁰⁵ Through this cast of characters, and a few more, Lear was able to address bigotry by using comedy.⁸⁰⁶

Lear set himself apart from other controversial producers of that time, such as his competitor Gary Tinker of MTM, because he was noted for addressing racial and political issues.⁸⁰⁷ Norman Lear's work in the 1970s attempted to place social criticism and cultural diversity within the confines of situation comedy.⁸⁰⁸ His creations became the impetus for the turn toward relevant, meaningful television in America due to the manner in which his shows confronted social and political issues. All of this was done within

⁸⁰² Ibid., 6, 16, 30.

⁸⁰³ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 13.

⁸⁰⁴ Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2001), 185.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁶ Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 433.

⁸⁰⁷ Karen Petruska, "Television Beyond the Network: First Run Syndication of Original Content in the 1970s," *The Velvet Light Trap* 75 (2015): 48.

⁸⁰⁸ Michael Carroll, "Agent Cooper's Errand in the Wilderness: Twin Peaks and American Mythology," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1993): 294.

mainstream programming that was not news.⁸⁰⁹ Lear theorized that the American public tells television creators what it likes or does not like, but the creator determines what is allowed. The creator allows the public to see and reserves the right to express life as he or she understands it. Lear considered networks to be intermediaries who inhibit the natural connection between television program creators and their intended audiences.⁸¹⁰ With this premise in mind, he worked to change how television programming was made and distributed.⁸¹¹ He represented an admonishment to the industry and brought a revolution in television content.⁸¹²

An effort to find ways to integrate real-world issues and experiences made Norman Lear interview his audiences following the taping of live shows. He would also attend and host meetings with the American Humanist Association.⁸¹³ He understood that if you wanted to alert the world about social and political issues, as well as cultural experiences, Hollywood would need to first wake up.⁸¹⁴ Lear felt that if one were to spend time with television instead of socializing with others, the viewer would eventually become involved with those characters.⁸¹⁵ Many critics, programmers, and artists in the 1970s did not initially like *All in the Family*. Among them was the Chairman of CBS, William Paley, actor and producer Lucile Ball, and comedian Bill Cosby.⁸¹⁶ There was,

⁸⁰⁹ Mock, "The Soap Opera Is a Hell," 112.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁸¹² *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸¹³ Diana Fleishman and Norman Fleishman, "How We Saved the World from Nuclear War," *The Humanist* 63, no. 2 (2003): 28.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸¹⁵ Richard Corliss, "Happy Days Are Here Again," 54.

⁸¹⁶ Donald Boggle, *Primetime*, 186, 185.

though, no denying the series' success. It ran for eight seasons and finished on top.⁸¹⁷

Black culture benefitted because it ushered in an era of storylines that focused on black issues from time to time.⁸¹⁸ Lear created a set of television families, like the Bunkers, who were unique. Many of Lear's shows starred African-American actors and broadcast black characters into American living rooms every week.⁸¹⁹

A year following the premiere of *All in the Family*, Lear released *Sanford and Son* about a black junk dealer and his son.⁸²⁰ Maude, Edith Bunker's cousin, appeared on *All in the Family* periodically. She eventually became the lead character on Lear's spinoff show, *Maude*. Maude's maid was a black woman named Florida Evans, who Lear used to create *Good Times*, a spinoff from *Maude*. The Jeffersons were the black family living next door to the Bunkers and with them, Lear created another spinoff, *The Jeffersons*⁸²¹

Sanford and Son, which was not a spinoff from another Lear creation, was a show about Fred and Lamont Sanford, and was set in a junk store business in 1970s Watts, Los Angeles, following the race riots.⁸²² It was the first sitcom to have an all-black cast portraying life in a loving, supportive environment where the characters argued but communicated.⁸²³ A show on a major network about black people in the 1970s was unprecedented. However, Lear was able to pull it off successfully because of the

⁸¹⁷ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 43.

⁸¹⁸ Jannette Dates, "Commercial Television," 290.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸²⁰ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 51.

⁸²¹ Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 434.

⁸²² Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 53.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*, 56.

controversy and edginess of *All in the Family*.⁸²⁴ Like *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son* was also based on a British sitcom, *Steptoe and Son*.

Fred Sanford became the first black father figure in American pop culture.⁸²⁵ He was considered a lazy man who drank, liked to watch television, gambled, orchestrated moneymaking schemes, and hung out with friends. He was comically unpleasant to everyone he met.⁸²⁶ Some may have thought that he was a lot like Archie Bunker, with his color being the only difference. However, Fred Sanford was different from Archie. He did quip about other cultures like Archie and had some strong ideas about those who were different from him. When he shared those ideas, other characters on the show were quick to try to teach him a lesson, just as characters tried to teach Archie lessons.⁸²⁷ Nevertheless, Fred had more finesse than Archie. This was apparent whenever he spoke to customers and women he tried to woo.⁸²⁸ Lamont was Fred's adult son, and did the majority of the work in the business. He was often at odds with his father and longed to move out. Whenever he tried to leave, his father would scheme to make him stay.⁸²⁹ Fred had a multitude of friends who would visit, such as Melvin, Bubba, and Grady.⁸³⁰ Grady, who was pegged to be Lamont's godfather, moved in to help while Fred was out of town.⁸³¹ Other than Fred, Aunt Esther was one of the most notable characters on the

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁸²⁹ Boggle, *Primetime Blues*, 188.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 189.

⁸³¹ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 62.

series. She was Fred's sister-in-law.⁸³² They did not like each other and were always involved in some type of confrontation in which neither was willing to back down.⁸³³

Sanford and Son was also used as a platform to usher in different cultures, other African-American artists, and to offer takes on whites in a dominant black culture.⁸³⁴ The Sanfords interacted with Julio, their Puerto Rican neighbor, who became the first recurring Puerto Rican character whose heritage was acknowledged.⁸³⁵ Achu, an Asian tenant at the Sanford Arms (a property they acquired and made into apartments when Julio moved) had a recurring role as well.⁸³⁶ A number of African-American artists were guests on *Sanford and Son*, such as Della Reese,⁸³⁷ Lena Horne,⁸³⁸ and B.B. King.⁸³⁹ In addition, Hoppy, a white police officer who patrolled the neighborhood with fellow officer Smitty (who was black), was one of the only recurring white cast members on the show. As black characters were often used in a stereotypical fashion, Hoppy's character was used in the same way on a black show in order to encompass all of white society.⁸⁴⁰

Like *All in the Family*, many critics and black political groups did not like *Sanford and Son*. The show was released at a time when black America was trying to lift itself up and change the way white America saw them.⁸⁴¹ It was considered anti-

⁸³² Boggle, *Primetime Blues*, 189.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁸³⁴ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 86, 87, 92, 93.

⁸³⁵ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 57.

⁸³⁶ "Famous Faces on 'Sanford and Son' (1972–1977) TV Series!," season 4, episodes, 5, 6, 17, 18, 24. *Internet Movie Database*, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls057126030/>.

⁸³⁷ "Della, Della, Della," *Sanford and Son*, directed by Mark Warren, season 5, episode 7, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0694078/>.

⁸³⁸ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 59.

⁸³⁹ "Fred Sings the Blues," *Sanford and Son*, directed by Russ Petranto, season 6, episode 23, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0694088/>.

⁸⁴⁰ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 92.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

progressive, stereotypical, and supportive of white beliefs about blacks.⁸⁴² One of the strongest comments about the show came from a black critic for the *New York Times*, Eugenia Collier. She denounced the sitcom as white to the core and a great example of sick American humor. She felt that Fred was an immature man who ruled his son and carried on like a spoiled child.⁸⁴³ Nothing in the show, she stated,

has traditionally motivated black humor—no redemptive suffering, no strength, no tragedy behind the humor. There is only the kind of selfishness and immaturity and bigotry that characterizes contemporary American humor...Fred Sanford and his little boy, Lamont, conceived by white minds and based on a white value system, are not strong black men capable of achieving—or even understanding—liberation. They are merely two more American child-men.⁸⁴⁴

Many other critics and readers of the *Times* did not agree with Collier and praised the show.⁸⁴⁵ What *Sanford and Son* did for the African-American audience was to provide a television experience whereby black characters related to each other, thus creating a black community highlighting black life and culture.⁸⁴⁶ It also paved the way for more black sitcoms by Lear and others, and proved that a black television show could attract a black *and* white audience.⁸⁴⁷ *Sanford and Son* and shows that followed it, such as *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*, showcased black families who worked hard and had family values.⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴² Ibid.

⁸⁴³ Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Film and Television: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Fireside, 1988), 303.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁶ Bogle, *Primetime Blues*, 190–191.

⁸⁴⁷ Bogle, *Blacks in American Film*, 302.

⁸⁴⁸ Ross, *Black and White Media*, 92.

Good Times focused on the life of a black family on the south side of Chicago and combined social issues with humor.⁸⁴⁹ *Good Times* was a show whose content was considered pedagogical in that it often taught lessons to its audience.⁸⁵⁰ The characters were known to engage in conversations about social issues such as education, health, economics, and violence. The episodes tended to uplift through education.⁸⁵¹ *Good Times* created a direct link to aspects of African American life and the political and social issues many blacks faced.⁸⁵²

Two African-American writers, Michael Evans and Eric Monte, created *Good Times*.⁸⁵³ Mike, who played Lionel Jefferson on *All in the Family* and *The Jeffersons*, was informed by Lear that CBS was looking to develop a new show about a black family. Evans asked Lear if they could create a script for consideration. Lear gave the green light.⁸⁵⁴ Lear was trying to determine how he would create a spinoff for Maude's maid character, played by Esther Rolle. Lear liked Evans and Monte's idea, with a few changes. The initial proposal was for a daytime program starring Rolle that showcased a single mother struggling to raise a family. However, Rolle was concerned with the impact the show would have on its audience and agreed to do it only if there was a strong father present.⁸⁵⁵ She was dedicated to ensuring that the African-American family was depicted accurately. She convinced Lear that these family members were supposed to be

⁸⁴⁹ Kevern Verney, *African Americans and US Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 85.

⁸⁵⁰ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 133.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid.

⁸⁵² Ibid., 132.

⁸⁵³ Boggle, *Primetime Blues*, 199.

⁸⁵⁴ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 97.

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid.

role models for people who may be in the same predicament and, as such, the lives of the television family had to be realistic.⁸⁵⁶

Good Times was about the experiences of the Evans family who lived in a Chicago housing project. Florida Evans was the mother, James Evans the father, and J.J. (James Junior), Thelma, and Michael were the children. The extended family included their neighbor and Florida's best friend, Willona.⁸⁵⁷ *Good Times* was a television black family portrayal primarily because it showed a complete family unit—mother, father, and three children—and showed the importance of having two parents for low-income children.⁸⁵⁸ It also portrayed how different family life could be for children who had only one parent or parents with challenges.⁸⁵⁹

There were episodes in which J.J.⁸⁶⁰ and later Michael⁸⁶¹ were approached and asked to join a gang. It was later divulged in both programs that the gang members were growing up in single-parent homes. There was another episode in which a single mother had so many children she found it almost impossible to notice that one child had a hearing problem, let alone find the time to address his needs for care.⁸⁶² Other issues were addressed that affected the family, such as drug use, physical abuse, alcoholism, and

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid., 97–98.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ "JJ Joins a Gang," *Good Times*, directed by Herbert Kenwith, season 2, episode 9, aired November 12, 1974, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0590919/>.

⁸⁶¹ "Michael the Warlord," *Good Times*, directed by Gerren Keith, season 4, episode 4, aired October 13, 1976, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0590881/>.

⁸⁶² "Florida's Favorite Passenger," *Good Times*, directed by Gerren Keith, season 6, episode 15, aired May 30, 1979, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0590849/>.

economic distress.⁸⁶³ Esther Rolle, who also wrote for the show, knew that black children would be watching. She wanted to ensure that they would be able to see the truth about African-American people and culture, and she felt that situations such as who was going to wash the dishes were not going to benefit children who faced real issues.⁸⁶⁴

Good Times was considered a breakthrough series in that it acknowledged poverty and other social ills black people face.⁸⁶⁵ Lear's *Good Times* also attempted to be honest by portraying the concerns of black people, which differed from those of whites.⁸⁶⁶ Until this time, television had perpetuated the myth that blacks did not face the issues they did. As a result, society had no basis for understanding the plight of blacks and the need for social service programs.⁸⁶⁷ Scholar James Comer states that situational comedies, such as *Good Times*, served a purpose in that white and black children who watched gained a positive insight and a new perspective on black people. However, there was still not a sitcom showing determined, successful blacks dealing responsibly with social issues regardless of the odds.⁸⁶⁸ In 1975, Norman Lear attempted to provide some balance.

Lionel Jefferson was a recurring character on *All in the Family*, as were Louise and George Jefferson, the black neighbors of the Bunkers. George Jefferson owned a dry cleaning store, which afforded his family the opportunity to live in the Bunker's neighborhood. However, the Jefferson family moved from Hauser Street in Queens to a high-rise apartment in 1975. *The Jeffersons* was about a black family who rose from the

⁸⁶³ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 100–101.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸⁶⁵ Boggle, *Primetime Blues*, 199.

⁸⁶⁶ Dates, "Commercial Television," 291.

⁸⁶⁷ James Comer, "The Importance of Television Images," 24.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

lower classes up to a higher socioeconomic status and ended up owning a chain of dry cleaning stores.⁸⁶⁹ The family was seen as one trying to adjust to the good life, but not forgetting its struggle to the top.⁸⁷⁰ The show was considered important because it depicted a black family with a higher-class status than television families of the past, which made the characters self-sufficient and contributed to elevating the race.⁸⁷¹ George Jefferson's language and attitude was liberating precisely because he was a black man in control of his destiny.⁸⁷² Regardless of how absurd he appeared, he was able to take care of this family and allow them all to live comfortably.

Other characters interacted almost daily with the Jefferson family. Mother Jefferson, George's mother, often visited. Other characters became extended members of the family. The Willis family consisted of Tom and Helen Willis, an interracial couple, and their daughter Jenny (their son Allen was introduced later). The Willises were the first interracial married couple to appear on a television series.⁸⁷³ Jenny dated and later married Lionel. The Jeffersons had a maid, Florence Johnston, who became a part of the family by association. Other characters included Harry Bentley, their neighbor, the doorman Ralph, and a bartender named Charlie.

Aside from family and socioeconomic matters, *The Jeffersons* addressed race and interracial interactions. Lear made interracial marriage a theme the show would confront.

⁸⁶⁹ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 131.

⁸⁷⁰ Boggle, *Primetime Blues*, 210, 213.

⁸⁷¹ Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 157.

⁸⁷² Boggle, *Primetime Blues*, 213.

⁸⁷³ Ibid.

The show promoted integration by showing different races interacting harmoniously.⁸⁷⁴

The Jeffersons intermingled frequently, on a social and business level, with white characters. Aside from the Willises, they often attended dinner or parties given by Mr. Bentley, who was invited to events in their home. The Whittendale family owned the building the Jeffersons lived in and George was in search of a business connection with Mr. Whittendale. George was often seen attempting to garner a business deal throughout the series. He and Louise often spent time in Charlie's bar, socializing with other tenants in the building. It was not unusual for characters to be in racially mixed company. Yet it was new for television.⁸⁷⁵

Shows such as *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Jeffersons* illuminated black concerns.⁸⁷⁶ Lear is noted for being innovative in bringing true depictions of black issues and lives to the rest of the world. His comedies brought African-American faces to television. His shows not only added to comedic discourse, but to the exploration of racism, class, and cultural differences.⁸⁷⁷ The Lear era contribution to black situation comedy moved cultural representation away from blacks as an object and toward black life as a subject.⁸⁷⁸ Future shows about black people, united with black audiences, and based on shared experiences are a significant part of his legacy. Americans in general and more importantly black people, learned a lot about different aspects of black culture by watching Lear's black families.

⁸⁷⁴ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 140.

⁸⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 142–143.

⁸⁷⁶ Coleman, *African American Viewers*, 88.

⁸⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

Why Laugh? Black Face, Black Books, and Black Humor as Resistance

Ford notes that preconceptions about African-Americans in early entertainment genres resulted in their being placed in limited comedic roles. Historically, characters were based on disparaging stereotypes.⁸⁷⁹ Scholar Mel Watkins paraphrases theorist Thomas Hobbs as stating that humor stems from that part of us that recognizes some high status within ourselves compared to the infirmity in others.⁸⁸⁰ Those who laugh too often are doing so because they are overly conscious of their own lack of ability and thus are driven to recognize the shortcomings of others.⁸⁸¹ Sigmund Freud wrote that we often laugh because of our awareness of disparities between what is perceived and what is possible.⁸⁸² Laughter provides an outlet in which to sublimate aggression.⁸⁸³ Laughter at comedic portrayals of contrariness implies that deviancy is normal, that we who are laughing are participating in the disparity and that we who enjoy it are moved within even as we enjoy watching it.⁸⁸⁴ This premise is in evidence when one considers the relationship between African-American humor and black audiences when minstrelsy performers enthralled the nation.⁸⁸⁵

There is a distinction between black humor and humorous black people. Black humor is a demeanor used to deal with situations and ease tensions. Humorous blacks are accepted by mainstream Americans because their image contained black people in certain

⁸⁷⁹ Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals," 266.

⁸⁸⁰ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slaver to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 24.

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸⁴ Robert Heilman, "Comedy and the World," *The Sewanee Review* 86, no. 1 (1978): 44.

⁸⁸⁵ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 25.

roles making them appear naïve or childlike.⁸⁸⁶ The public image of black people as caricatures, happy, singing, and dancing was a performance done both for survival and for the pleasure of whites. Whites accepted this image of the simple Negro and used this reduction of Negroes to justify slavery.⁸⁸⁷ The minstrel was created from the exploitation of this image. Social scholar Christine Acham states that during slavery, black people told tales that their white masters often misinterpreted and these trickster stories are the roots of African-American humor.⁸⁸⁸ These stories speak of the victories of the weak over the strong or of a hero who outwitted his master to gain rewards or freedom.⁸⁸⁹ As the minstrel grew in popularity among white and black audiences, black people found a way for this ridicule to benefit them.

By the end of the nineteenth century, as black actors become more popular as blackface minstrels, they participated more in this form of entertainment and eventually black people became the predominant minstrel audience.⁸⁹⁰ Customarily, the audience was comprised of members of the lower economic class of society, whether black or white.⁸⁹¹ Regardless, minstrel entertainment was the most popular form of entertainment during the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁹² Watkins argues that, just because minstrel performances were popular among blacks, it should not be presumed that black people believed the minstrel portrayals or that they were attempting to suppress themselves.

Perhaps their amusement grew from agreement between the actors and the audience, who

⁸⁸⁶ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 9.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁸⁹¹ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 126.

⁸⁹² *Ibid.*

both found that the characters were exaggerated and ridiculous.⁸⁹³ To be successful, comedic actors would have to build a rapport with the audience. Minstrels were popular among black audiences, and this would seem to suggest that perhaps the black actor and the black audience shared a common experience.⁸⁹⁴ In addition, for downtrodden blacks minstrel performances featuring black actors provided a view of legitimate celebrities with whom to identify, which was rare.⁸⁹⁵ The black theater grew out of the desire to entertain black audiences in segregated regions of America. The black road shows and theaters offered a black communal space for actors and comedians to practice black humor and to determine if their craft was good based on the call-and-response participation from the audience.⁸⁹⁶ Black minstrel audiences of this time were not concerned with the comedic act's effect on white audiences. The black audiences of this time were not made up of those members of black society who would define the stereotypical renderings as simply entertainment.⁸⁹⁷ The black minstrel audience more than likely took the performance at face value.⁸⁹⁸

The more educated blacks of the late nineteenth century were not a part of the minstrel audience.⁸⁹⁹ They did not feel that the minstrel performances upheld the concept of Du Bois's "talented tenth."⁹⁰⁰ It did not conform to their image of blacks as

⁸⁹³ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 11.

⁸⁹⁴ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 127.

⁸⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁶ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 11.

⁸⁹⁷ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 126.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid.

respectable members of dominate American society.⁹⁰¹ They considered this form of entertainment to be in the same category as black folk culture, disreputable and embarrassing.⁹⁰² Nevertheless, these performances often addressed everyday black issues of the time such as lack of resources or employment. Minstrels formed the basis of political comedy.⁹⁰³

The minstrel performance was comedy that provided a hidden transcript formed in a communal setting about topics a group of people understood as its reality.⁹⁰⁴ These songs and dances were methods of protest and sometimes were signals for escape and rebellion.⁹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, the interpretations of these images were quite different for mainstream audiences. What their white audience did not know was that behind their exaggerated humorous expressions the white audience was being ridiculed and critiqued.⁹⁰⁶ Acham supports this notion by stating that satire and signifying (indirect argument or persuasion to imply, suggest, beg, or boast using gestures or verbal means⁹⁰⁷) were ingrained in African-American society but were hidden from the broader public. Thus, whites were not aware that they were being criticized.⁹⁰⁸ Critic Robert Heilman states that the irony is that even though a satirical piece may be chastising its target audience, the audience did not realize it was being castigated.⁹⁰⁹

⁹⁰¹ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 12.

⁹⁰² Ibid.

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 54.

⁹⁰⁸ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 10.

⁹⁰⁹ Heilman, "Comedy and the World," 54.

Just as comedy can be a tool of acceptance of societal issues, it can also be corrective and the voice of freedom.⁹¹⁰ When comedy is corrective, it is more satirical than comedic because it opposes rather than accepts.⁹¹¹ To the intended audience, the corrective action may only seem as though it is an act.⁹¹² If the corrective action of the satirical piece is understood as a possible modifier of a previously accepted viewpoint that does not adequately embrace reality, the acceptance of that piece could be liberating.⁹¹³ Liberation is based on the audience understanding that this comedic piece has had an impact on their imagination and helps free them from rigid ideas of what the world must be or actually is.⁹¹⁴

Prior to the Civil Rights era, America was a racial dictatorship that defined American identity as white, leading to the marginalization of African-Americans and many other minority races.⁹¹⁵ Reconstruction at the end of the Civil War presented an opportunity for American political activities to include and benefit black people. Instead, Reconstruction failed to uphold the tenets of abolitionism, which led to the perpetuation of the color line and the persistence of social disorder that has lasted to this day.⁹¹⁶ This loss of the possibility for equal opportunity for a better life propelled blacks into communal spaces where their own politics, community, and cultural creations thrived.⁹¹⁷

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁹¹¹ Ibid.

⁹¹² Ibid., 54.

⁹¹³ Ibid.

⁹¹⁴ Ibid.

⁹¹⁵ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 7.

⁹¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid.

African-American humor was given a space to develop its own set of characteristics.⁹¹⁸ In these spaces, black people could be themselves away from the eyes of white authority. African-American humor, including the way it was appropriated by white audiences, was born out of a desire to depreciate the political and social commentary found in African-American humor.⁹¹⁹ The dominant culture's fetish with the desire to watch blackness is founded on the issue of relegating the black body to spectacle, and is still prevalent today in the way black performers are objectified and fixated upon.⁹²⁰ As black people continued to live two separate lives (one around whites and others and one around blacks), the duality of the humor of blacks can be seen operating in the same manner: one type of humor in public and another in private, all-black settings.⁹²¹ Both were mechanisms for navigating the hostilities of the time.

Comedy can celebrate superiority and things that are well done without rejecting things that are not well done.⁹²² It often celebrates good or common sense, that balance between the decision to surrender to the stereotype as a means of survival to reach an end.⁹²³ Comedy is often about accepting what will be manageable and possibly satisfying and finding the things that are disappointing understandable. This may even lead to forgiving the unforgivable.⁹²⁴ Comedy greets the hostiles of the world with jest or

⁹¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹¹⁹ Constance Bailey, "Fight the Power: African American Humor as a Discourse of Resistance," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 4 (2012): 255.

⁹²⁰ Bailey, "Fight the Power," 255.

⁹²¹ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 9.

⁹²² Heilman, "Comedy and the World," 50.

⁹²³ Ibid., 51.

⁹²⁴ Ibid.

fantasy.⁹²⁵ To accept the implications of comedic pieces is to sometimes show a love for humanity and accept that it cannot be improved.⁹²⁶ This was the case with the minstrel shows and their black audiences.

Comedy and its perspective can be influential in that while it treats the disparities as bearable or inflicts a satirical correction, it asserts that societal changes are imaginable and possible.⁹²⁷ Comedy is both an agent and a symptom of civilization.⁹²⁸ Civilization manifests the issues from which comedy springs and those issues presented in comedy may be conceived of as a catalyst for the need for civility.⁹²⁹

Satirical black humor of common folks can be officially traced back to literary works in the late 1920s.⁹³⁰ Watkins credits writer Rudolph Fisher with portraying the urban black man without subjecting him to self-ridicule or presenting him in a primitive manner.⁹³¹ He was noted for exploring the area of make-believe and shams that are direct consequences of America's absurd racial position.⁹³² Watkins also credits Fisher with being the first Negro to write social satire and usher in the opportunity for the black folk humor of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes.⁹³³ Hurston and Hughes, in turn, are credited with writing the first African-American theatrical comedy

⁹²⁵ Ibid.

⁹²⁶ Ibid.

⁹²⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁹²⁸ Ibid.

⁹²⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁹³⁰ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 417.

⁹³¹ Ibid.

⁹³² Ibid., 418.

⁹³³ Ibid.

piece that was not a minstrel show. *Mule Bone* was based on Hurston's short story *The Bone of Contention*.⁹³⁴

Comedy's opponents are ideological constrainers of the world, or enforcers against egalitarians. Their purpose is to make a law and not a play. They are either enforcers of the utopian or enforcers of the average.⁹³⁵ Historically, African-American folk humor was seen by some as an impediment to black political advancement.⁹³⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the "talented tenth" was that they were the segments of the black population that should be looked to for the advancement of the race. Du Bois believed that the accomplishments of this segment should be emphasized and any actions of black folk culture, legitimate or otherwise, should be labeled as vulgar minstrelsy. These actions included dance, work songs, spirituals, and anything from African sources.⁹³⁷ As such, minstrel shows were never popular among middle-class and upper-class blacks.⁹³⁸ Du Bois believed that as black people rose in class, they would be less inclined to laugh at Negro comedy.⁹³⁹ By the 1950s, black actors who wished to be taken seriously avoided comedic roles so as not to appear like minstrels and thereby tainted by playing demeaning roles.⁹⁴⁰ If white audiences thought the rendering was funny, a serious black actor wanted nothing to do with it.⁹⁴¹

⁹³⁴ Carme Manuel, "Mule Bone: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Dream Deferred of an African American Theatre of Black Word," *African American Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 80.

⁹³⁵ Heilman, "Comedy and the World," 57.

⁹³⁶ Watkins, "On the Real Side," 423.

⁹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁹³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴⁰ Glenda Carpio, Gerald Early, and Werner Sollors, "Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition," *Bulletin on American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 63, no. 4 (2010): 31.

⁹⁴¹ Carpio et al., "Black Humor," 31.

Nevertheless, comedy became the platform to address issues publicly, both inside and outside the black community.⁹⁴² The disdain for political or social actions against blacks were hidden in scripts or masked in renderings.⁹⁴³ Areas that were more open to accepting blacks and allowed integrated audiences naturally became the places in which one would be able to see black actors openly confront racists.⁹⁴⁴ However, they could also be seen performing satirical pieces in the south in a circuit of black clubs and bars known as the “Chitlin Circuit.” These venues allowed blacks to be entertained by what was considered low-level humorous pieces that whites customarily found funny.⁹⁴⁵ Comedians worked their material in these venues so that the black audience would understand it. During the Civil Rights era, those who were fortunate enough to perform for whites would clean up their acts a bit so white audiences could understand them, but not so much that blacks could not relate.⁹⁴⁶ Many comedians, such as Dick Gregory, used this strategy to gain access to white venues. Then, once they gained popularity, they moved to sharp social satire expressing racial frustrations.⁹⁴⁷

Constance Bailey’s study of African-American humor finds that it was designed for African-Americans, but becomes distorted, tainted, and significantly weakened when adopted by mainstream audiences.⁹⁴⁸ When looking at black comics, the viewers should consider more than what they think is humorous. They should pay attention to the social

⁹⁴² Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 14..

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁵ Donald Morales, “Do Black Theater Institutions Translate into Great Drama?,” *African American Review* 31, no. 3 (1997), 633.

⁹⁴⁶ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 17.

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁴⁸ Bailey, “Fight the Power,” 253.

commentary presented, because black comics are often doing more than telling jokes. They are offering insight into widespread social conditions in America.⁹⁴⁹

Bailey compares the rant of Bill Cosby about the irresponsible actions of lower-class blacks and their child-rearing practices to Chris Rock's sketch about black people versus niggers. Both comedians are saying the same thing, but their presentation is different. Cosby is presenting criticism about the race without the use of humor. Chris Rock's comedy is presented as a part of their show. Both serve the same purpose-calling attention to pertinent issues that affect the African-American community and that may have not have been addressed elsewhere. Both purposes encourage black people to be more aware of their misrepresentations and their representations of themselves.⁹⁵⁰

Scholar Brenda Carpio describes African-American humor as both an energetic model of political and social critique as well as a source of creativity.⁹⁵¹ African-Americans, by way of their attempt to sustain and survive in the midst of insurmountable inhumanity, developed humor for their culture to learn to laugh and to keep from crying. To hide their outrage at oppressive social and political systems, black humor is marked with deceptive language and indirection for the sole purpose of presenting a double meaning, whether playful commentary or serious critique.⁹⁵² In the dominant society, the black comedian is allowed to use black humor to speak of things in society that other blacks want to say but are just too volatile or inflammatory to describe without using

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid., 254.

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid., 257–258.

⁹⁵¹ Ibid.

⁹⁵² Ibid.

humor.⁹⁵³ The comedian and his comedic works are able to address these ills as a caricature not to be taken seriously.⁹⁵⁴ Cultural criticism has a better reception when done in the guise of comedy.⁹⁵⁵

Comedic television in the late 1980s and early 1990s protested stereotypes through *reductio ad absurdum* (in satire, an argument that breaks down an idea to the point of absurdity).⁹⁵⁶ By using satire, African-Americans have been able to express their displeasure with their treatment by the dominant society. They are able to celebrate African-American culture and community life, share strategies created to outsmart the oppressors, and satirize the demeaning humor of whites.⁹⁵⁷ Black comedians have been able to use black humor to influence American popular culture more than any other genre of entertainment, with the exception of black music.⁹⁵⁸ Humanities scholar Gerald Early states that humor is something that determines whether you are an insider or outsider. Humor is an important creative act that can bind a particular cultural group together by giving it an identity and defining it.⁹⁵⁹ Comedy reinforces a movement toward refined and balanced living.⁹⁶⁰

⁹⁵³ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid., 257.

⁹⁵⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁹⁵⁶ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 563, 566.

⁹⁵⁷ Lee Bell, Brett Murphy, and Rosemarie Roberts, "Flipping the Script: Analyzing Youth Talk About Race and Racism," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2008): 337.

⁹⁵⁸ Bailey, "Fight the Power," 257.

⁹⁵⁹ Carpio et al., "Black Humor," 29.

⁹⁶⁰ Heilman, "Comedy and the World," 62.

Summary

Black people became more visible on television in the 1980s and remained a fixture on television into the early 2000s. This was a significant moment in entertainment and social history—one deserving attention. Black audiences transformed television in the 1980s into a cultural institution constructed and produced for them.⁹⁶¹ Television became a central avenue for the circulation of blackness.⁹⁶² To accomplish this feat, television had to frame black representation in appropriate terms in which the assumptions, knowledge, and experiences of viewers are shared by different demographics.⁹⁶³

The genre of television produced during this time, more than any other depicting black actors, was situational comedies.⁹⁶⁴ Most centered on black family experiences.⁹⁶⁵ Just as scholars assess how negative attributes of black people are portrayed in the media, these scholars should also focus on some positive attributes of blacks portrayed in the media. The assessment of television families and marriage should examine how that content is framed and what message about the black family is communicated to the audience. Although a show may have been planned originally to serve as comedic entertainment for viewers, it could also serve as a teaching tool about the strengths of the African-American family. Black family comedies seen between 1980 and 2000 may offer scenes that negate Moynihan's theory of tangled pathology. If the black television

⁹⁶¹ Gray, *Watching Race*, 57.

⁹⁶² *Ibid.*

⁹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹⁶⁴ Hunt, *Channeling Blackness*, 272.

⁹⁶⁵ Gray, *Watching Race*, 60.

family is measured by what is considered strengths, what the world has been taught to recognize as weaknesses in the black community are now seen to be positive and beneficial to black life. This altered vision of the black family teaches its viewers that if they use a different scale to measure viability, then researchers may find positive family characteristics. Black comedic television programming about the family, deemed useful and valuable, can serve an important positive role in socialization.

Black families, slow to purchase cable and videocassette players, were wooed by commercial television. Their viewership surpassed that of the upper-income white demographic. Black viewership of commercial television programming in the 1980s and 1990s steadily increased as new black shows aired.⁹⁶⁶ As more programming became available, black viewers watching black families on television noted that even when the socioeconomic dynamics were different from their own, they still could relate to the tableaux.⁹⁶⁷ Television offered an escape from mundane realities in which some people lived. Even though the shows are fantasies, some of what is viewed may seem familiar and remind viewers of some aspects of their own lives.⁹⁶⁸

African-Americans watch more television than any other ethnicity.⁹⁶⁹ African-American children and teenagers watch TV at least three hours a day and see few depictions of positive, supportive marriages and families that look like them.⁹⁷⁰ African-American adolescents, who watch many hours of television, do not see familial

⁹⁶⁶ Gray, *Watching Race*, 67.

⁹⁶⁷ Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 18, 19.

⁹⁶⁸ JoEllen Fisherkeller, "It Just Like Teaching People 'Do the Right Things': Using TV to Become a Good and Powerful Man," in *Say it Loud: African American Audiences, Media, and Identity*, Robin Means Coleman, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 163.

⁹⁶⁹ Gordon et al., "A Review of Sexual Content," 218, 220.

⁹⁷⁰ Berry, "Black Family Life on Television," 238, 235.

representations of love. This can affect how they identify or recognize marriage and family as a possibility for their lives. When television shows portray African-American families who constantly fight, are engaged in criminal activity, lack love and respect for others, those watching are unable to imagine rewards in black families or love relationships with black partners. They may be unable, in turn, to develop a positive perception and decide not to participate in any loving relationship.

Depicting the strengths of African-American families on TV can be an essential tool when viewers formulate a definition of positive and supportive families and cultural identities related to marriage and family. Television shows about black families contribute to the survival of black families because TV is such a prominent socialization tool for teaching people how to behave, dream, desire, and how to express love.

Scholarly works or studies about the black family and society's influence on it did not include the positive influence that media can have. Television programming strongly contradicted Moynihan's findings. Black television families reminded viewers, and those who tallied program ratings, that they had value, that the black family is relevant. What those studies do not tell their readers, and what black television shows are telling their viewers, is that black family strengths cannot be measured by white family standards. Some scholars have argued that some successful shows were not black shows and that the shows about race removed American families.⁹⁷¹ Some stated that these shows were not authentic, failed the African-American community, and did not use their popularity to

⁹⁷¹ Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 18.

address issues that black people faced.⁹⁷² The shows often demonstrated real issues of the black family by depicting their strong attributes. The shows illustrated for America what black families can look like, even if there is only one parent in the household.

⁹⁷² Zook, *Color by FOX*, 2, 15.

CHAPTER 4

BLACK FAMILY TELEVISION SHOWS BETWEEN 1980 AND 1989

This historical analysis examined two research questions pertaining to the portrayal of African-American families on major network television between 1980 and 2000.

RQ1. Were there any indications of characteristics of realistic positive black families depicted on major network television between 1980 and 2000 in the shows selected for review?

RQ2. If a black family was portrayed on television, was it done so in a way that depicts the strengths and success of that family?

To determine if the black family television shows on major network television between 1980 and 2000 were realistic portrayals of African-American families (Research Question 1), 30 episodes were examined using Andrew Billingsley's definition of the African-American family:

[An African-American family is] an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, formal adoption, informal adoption, marriage, or by appropriation sustained by a history of common residence in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures both internal to and external to itself. Numerous interlocking elements come together, forming an extraordinary resilient institution.⁹⁷³

⁹⁷³ Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: the Enduring Legacy of African American Families* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 28.

This chapter and the next contain the episode summaries of the 10 Top 30 black family television shows on major network television between 1980 and 2000. Three episodes were randomly selected from 10 black family television shows that were broadcast for more than one programming season. The summaries are separated into chapters by decades. The episode summaries are written in present tense as if they are being watched in real time. The shows are categorized by the year they were placed in the Top 30 on a major network. Family strengths were determined using the definition noted in the methodology and are charted at the end of each episode summary (“S” denoting season and “E” denoting episode).

The Jeffersons—1980

The Jeffersons is a spinoff from *All in the Family*. The Jeffersons were the black next-door neighbors to the Bunkers, the family on which *All in the Family* was based.⁹⁷⁴ George Jefferson, his wife Louis, and his son, Lionel, moved to the upper class, and to the east side of New York after George found success as an owner of a chain of dry cleaners. The nucleus of the show is the tie that binds the family together and their relationship with their neighbors.⁹⁷⁵ Their son Lionel, an engineer, is married to Jenny Willis, the daughter of the neighbors Tom and Helen Willis. The Willises are good

⁹⁷⁴ Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, Jefferson; McFarland & Company, 2007, 133.

⁹⁷⁵ Gregory Adamo, *African Americans in Television: Behind the Scenes*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2010, 166.

friends of the Jeffersons. Harry Bentley is their next-door neighbor.⁹⁷⁶ The maid, Florence Johnston,⁹⁷⁷ is more a family member than an employee.

Season 8 Episode 23, "A Small Victory" (CBS, April 18, 1982)

The episode opens with Louise preparing to go to The Help Center to work. Helen comes by to meet her, before leaving they decide to have a cup of coffee. Louise asks Florence to get it, but Florence decides she wants to be a part of their conversation first. They talk about The Help Center and the current state of it. It is losing money due to government budget cuts. In addition, they are also losing clients who are not taking advantage of the programs they do have. Both Louise and Helen are despondent. Louise is thinking of quitting but after speaking to Florence, who encourages her to keep trying, she is pondering what to do. George and Tom (Helen's husband and the Jefferson's neighbor) come home early from work and ask their wives to go out with them for the afternoon. They explain that they are going to the Help Center, the problems it is having, and their feelings about it. George and Tom tell both Louise and Helen to quit and just enjoy their lives. They are considering it.

While at the help center, a young prostitute named Maggie, who had been abused by her pimp, comes in for ice for her black eye. Louise and Helen try to help her but she is refusing help. She tried to shame Helen and Louise for being rich women who do not know anything about poor folk. After leaving, Louise and Helen feel as though they are not being effective and are debating whether to quit.

⁹⁷⁶ Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, Jefferson, McFarland, 1989, 135, 136.

⁹⁷⁷ Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, Jefferson, McFarland, 1989, 138.

They leave the Help Center and go to a local bar for a drink—the bar is a hole in the wall. Louise ponders her new life and wonders if she really is out of touch with poor people whose lives now mirror what her life used to be like. She now she feels she is just a visitor to the neighborhood where she used to live. Louise and Hellen determine that they do not need to give up their new lives to help others. They consider that maybe George is right and that they should stop trying to save the world.

Maggie comes into the bar to speak with her pimp who is there playing pool. She tells him she wants to go home to Cincinnati and stop being a prostitute. Her pimp is resistant and tells her she is not going anywhere and that he will have to beat her again to get her back on track. Louise and Helen overhear it and try to intervene. They confront the pimp and tell him she will not be working for him anymore. He ignores them and grabs Maggie, telling her that he loves her and if she leaves, she will lose him. Louise and Helen jump in front of her and tell him he will have to come through them. He pulls a knife on them, but the bartender pulls a gun. The pimp leaves. The bartender states he does not allow trouble in his bar and notes his empathy is because he has a daughter. Louise thanks him for his help and she and Helen take Maggie to the airport to go home.

Strengths. George and Tom have achieved a lot in their lives and wish for their wives to relax and have fun and not worry about working. However, Louise and Helen feel that they still have something they can contribute to society. This shows strong achievement orientation. George and Tom's success also denotes strong achievement orientation. Some may even contribute a strong religious orientation to Louise and Helen's strong desire to put their own lives on the line to help Maggie. Maggie's desire

to no longer be a prostitute and risk her life to stop denotes a strong achievement orientation. George, Tom, Louise, and Helen all display strong work orientation in that they are all dedicated to their work and desire to live well.

Season 9, Episode 4, "Social Insecurity," (CBS, October 17, 1982)

After the women return from a shopping trip, Tom and Helen Willis and Louise engage in a conversation about how blessed they are to have enough money saved for their retirement. Florence is concerned because she does not have a pension plan. Louise suggests that she speak to George about giving Florence a pension plan. When she does, George tells her no. Louise expresses her concern about the conversation and tries to get them to talk more about it. George however states he is done with the conversation and the answer will remain no. Florence feels as though he has no heart.

The following morning, George hollers for Florence to get his breakfast. She emerges from the kitchen with a strike sign. He then asks his wife Louise to get his breakfast. She also emerges with a strike sign. He then says that he will go upstairs and have breakfast with the Willises. When he opens the door to take the elevator, the Willises are in the hallway picketing as well. Louise tries again to encourage him to give her a plan as everyone in the building is against him. He does not believe it. The doorbell rings in the middle of the conversation. George answers the door and there stands a woman he does not know. She too is holding a picket sign and kicks George in the leg. Even the doorman, who will usually do anything for a dollar, is in support of Florence. Louise tries again to encourage George to give her a pension, just as he has for his dry cleaning employees. George stands his ground. He goes to the door and asks the

Willises to come in and have a seat. He asks Louise and Florence to have a seat as well. He pulls out a videotape and tells them to watch it. It is his last will and testament. In addition to his wife and son, he has included the Willises and Florence in his will. He is leaving Florence a trust fund. In the video, he states that Florence is family. After the viewing of the video, Louise asks why he did not show them the video instead of allowing things to get out of hand. Florence tells Louise not to talk to him that way because he is a saint. George states that is why he did not say anything. He did not want Florence to change how she treated him because he likes that they quip with each other. To him is it an act of endearment.

Strengths. George, Louise, the Willises, and Florence are all extended family members (married and fictive) with strong kinship bonds. Florence's desire to plan well for her future shows a strong achievement orientation. The fact that Florence feels the Jeffersons and the Willises are blessed denotes a strong religious orientation. George and Tom's success and their ability to provide a pension for their families is indicative of strong work orientation.

Season 9, Episode 27, "Personal Business," (CBS, May 1, 1983)

Louise and Florence are enjoying an afternoon with each other when George comes home early from work. He says that his afternoon is clear. So, Louise says that they can do something together. However, George says no, he is going to the bar to arm wrestle and unwind. As George goes to change clothes, Tom Willis comes to borrow a camera for when he and Helen will be together. Louise decides to take Tom's advice because she wants to spend more time with George. She states to Tom that George does

not seem to have time for her anymore. He tells them about the Rappaports in the building. They stopped doing things together and now they are getting a divorce. Tom tells her that he and Helen had the same problem, so they decided to spend at least one night a week with each other doing something fun.

As George prepares to leave, Louise puts her foot down and tells George she wants to spend more time together. Florence emerges from the kitchen and tells them they should plan a day together each week. After trying to decide on a good day to do so and what to do, Louise decides that day was today and that they should try some of the things that the Willises do. She and George go for a bike ride in the park and return home with broken legs.

They call for Florence but soon discover that she has decided to take her 2-week vacation so that they can spend time together. If gets off to a slow start as George is a little miffed that his leg is broken because of Louise's idea to ride bikes. They eventually settle in the kitchen to play Scrabble. During the game, Louise drops a letter in her cast. George shakes her leg to get it out then drops her leg back to the floor. Then he does not use the letter correctly. In her anger, Louise tells Georgie that she feels he has been treating her unfairly since they broke their legs when all she is trying to do is spend time with him. He states that he has upset about her big ideas, which has led to their legs being broken. She states she has another idea and goes to the refrigerator and retrieves a can of whipped cream. She sprays it on his head. Then he playfully throws a little on her, and they begin to have fun. Louise states that George can have fun with her. George

agrees and says that he can think of no one else he wants to spend his time. She turns up the radio and they dance together as best they can in their casts.

Strengths. Louise and George’s commitment to their marriage denotes a strong kinship bond.

Table 3. Summary of *The Jefferson’s* Strengths

<i>The Jeffersons</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S8E23		x		x	x
S9E4	x	x			x
S9E27	x				

Diff’rent Strokes—1981

Diff’rent Strokes is a show about Arnold and Willis Jackson, two orphaned brothers, who have been adopted by white millionaire Phillip Drummond. The boys’ mother was a former housekeeper of the Drummonds who, before dying, asked that Mr. Drummond adopt and raise her sons.⁹⁷⁸ Mr. Drummond has a daughter, Kimberly. In addition, several housekeepers live in the penthouse at different points in the show.⁹⁷⁹

Season 2, Episode 17, “Big Business,” (ABC, January 30, 1980)

The family is having breakfast and Willis mentions how they are all broke. Mr. Drummond talks about how everybody wants more money, even the employees at his

⁹⁷⁸ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 224.

⁹⁷⁹ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 225.

company. When Adelaide gives Arnold his lunch, Mr. Drummond notices that the bag is heavy. Adelaide says that she always packs him extra sandwiches. Mr. Drummond asks the kids if they are serious about not being able to get along with their allowance. They all say they do but after further conversation, he realizes that they just want extra money for luxuries. He tells them to figure out how to make some extra money. Willis says that they cannot work until age 16. Mr. Drummond tells them to start their own business. Find something that people need or want and provide it. He gets a call about something at his factory and leaves bidding the children farewell. Adelaide asks how they fared in asking for the money. They say not too well. She tells them that she packed extra brownies in their bags and hopes they make them feel better. The kids thank her for the brownies because all the kids at school love them. The kids prepare to leave for school when Willis gets the idea that they should sell the brownies instead of giving them away.

When they return from school, Arnold and Willis speak to their father about their new business idea. They have already made \$1.20 profit. He tells them that they should speak to Adelaide about it. He also asks them about their costs. They tell him that he can pay the costs and they can get the profit. The boys speak to Adelaide and she agrees to make a few dozen brownies for them to sell. Mr. Drummond tells them that they should pay her for the extra work. Adelaide declines the money but she agrees that they can help her with some of her cleaning.

Later, Kimberly expresses her excitement about their new business. The boys feel that they have already done all the work—suppliers, distribution and a name. They decide they do not want to include her. She gives in and says that it is a shame because they

could have made even more selling the brownies at her school. Giving the idea a second thought, they decide to include her. They offer her a penny for every brownie sold, then two pennies. She tells them she wants half of everything she sells. They agree but think she is greedy. During the day, they had listened to their father handle a business matter and heard him say that the one that takes all the risks is entitled to the greed. They give in and decide to let her have the deal.

Willis comes up with the idea to add raisins and nuts to the brownies and up the price from 10 cents to 20 cents. The business picks up. They get a big order for Big Wally's candy store for 5 dozen brownies. Adelaide tells them that she cannot handle an order that big and she bows out. Their dad tells them to either figure out what to do or give the money back. They consider giving the money back but Willis has already used \$5.00 of it and Arnold has used \$2.00. They decide they have to make the brownies. Kimberley returns home and hears their dilemma. She tells them that brownies are not that hard to make as they are in Adelaide's cookbook. She offers to make them. Then she tells them that she wants half of the profits. Willis says no, they are taking all the risk. Kimberly puts her foot down and tells them if she does not get half she walking out of the venture. She reminds them that they need her. They however decide not to partner with her and to try and make the brownies on their own so they can keep all the profits.

The boys go out to get the supplies. They have much more than what is needed. They make a complete mess of the kitchen trying to make the brownies. Mr. Drummond and Adelaide return from an errand. When they hear a commotion in the kitchen, Kimberly alerts them that the boys decided to make their brownies on their own.

Adelaide is distraught over the mess they had made in the kitchen. Mr. Drummond scolds them and asks what happened. Kimberly explains that she offered to help but they were being greedy and wanted to keep all the profit for themselves. Mr. Drummond asks them to consider their shortsightedness and tells them that sometimes they have to give up some of their profit for their own good. The boys tell Mr. Drummond that they were just doing as he did. Mr. Drummond says that situation was different. The phone rings and the person Mr. Drummond fired earlier that day is wishing to speak to him about sharing the profits. The man on the phone asks him if his decision not to share the profit is shortsighted. Mr. Drummond then realizes the boys were right. He then realizes that he was being greedy and the boys were just trying to do what they saw him doing. He agrees to speak with his former employee and apologizes to the boys. He tells them in light of being a bad example that he will pay back Big Wally. The whole family then pitches in to clean the kitchen.

Strengths. The boys' desire to go into business is indicative of strong achievement, orientation, and work orientations. Mr. Drummond also exhibits strong work and achievement orientation in his business dealings. Willis and Arnold were adopted by their mother's former employer because she mother asked him to care for her children after she dies, demonstrating a strong kinship bond and development of fictive kinship bonds. Mr. Drummond takes on the role of the mother as he nurtures his children. The family roles are flexible and adaptable.

Season 3, Episode 9, "The Loan," (ABC, January 14, 1981)

Manny, the doorman, and Arnold are having a conversation about staying in school so that he can do well when he grows up. Arnold tells Manny that they think his job is neat. Manny tells him that he would much rather be his own boss and there are benefits to doing so, including giving himself a pay raise when he wants. Manny then tells Arnold that he has an opportunity to invest in a limo service. He tells them that he is a little short with his part of the investment. He needs \$4,000. Arnold asks him if he asked the bank. Manny states the bank turned him down. Arnold encourages him to keep trying. Manny says he hopes something comes through soon as he has to have it by the following week. Arnold then tells him his father can help. Manny tell Arnold that he will come by with the contract later that evening.

When Arnold gets home, his family is playing Monopoly. He asks his father if he can speak with him. While playing, his father is using the game as a learning tool about business. He is losing and has to pay Willis for landing on one of his hotels. He gives Willis the monopoly money, but Willis states that he is not ruthless and suggests that he lend his father the Monopoly money to keep playing. His father tells him that he should not be loose with his money. He explains that even though it is just a game, it is a lot like real life and it is not good business. He state that in general it is not good business to lend money to people unless they have collateral. After giving his lesson, he alerts them that he has a meeting and reminds them that the Goodwill Truck is coming and his clothes are on the bed ready to go.

On his way out the door, Mr. Drummond remembers that Arnold wanted to speak to him. Arnold asks if he was serious about lending to people with collateral. He then tells him about Manny's need. Arnold tells him that Manny has collateral. His dad agrees to speak to Manny later. Manny stops by as Mr. Drummond is leaving and he tells Manny that he will speak to him later. Arnold tells Manny that his father will consider it but he needs collateral. Manny then tells Arnold that he has heard that before and really does not have any. However, he had been given an opportunity to turn \$100 into \$4,000 but he needs \$100. Arnold tells Manny that he has \$100 that he has been saving for a 10-speed bike but he can have it because he really needs it. Manny accepts and tells Arnold that he will give him \$200 back in return.

Arnold goes to his safe box to get his money. Willis and Kimberly see him take the money out and ask why he needs it. He tells them he has a big deal cooking and cannot talk to them. He gives the money to Manny, who promises that he will give him \$200 back. Once Manny leaves, Arnold tells Kimberly and Willis what he is doing. They ask him how Manny is going to double the money. He says he did not ask. They tell him to call him and find out because it is his investment. When Arnold reaches out to Manny, he finds out the Manny is going use the money to bet on the horses. Kimberly and Willis tell Arnold to go get his money.

Arnold catches Manny and gets his money back. Manny gives it to him and tells him the only reason he took it is that for a minority man like him it is difficult for him to get the good jobs because of his accent. Arnold tells him that he understands because things were like that for him before he got rich (adopted). Arnold turns to go back

upstairs when he decides that he wants to give Manny the money. Arnold then goes upstairs and Manny heads to the track.

Arnold, Kimberly, and Willis are watching the race when their father comes in from work. They turn the television off and try to get their father out of the room. They tell him to get more stuff together for Goodwill because they will be there soon. When he leaves the room, they go upstairs to watch the race. When he came upstairs, they go downstairs. The horse Manny was to bet on wins, they cheer, but they are caught watching the race by their father. They explain to him what has happened and he is appalled. The doorbell rings and Manny is there. Arnold goes to him to congratulate him and Manny tells Arnold that he did not place the bet. He states that he started to but then thought about what would happen to their friendship if the horse lost. Therefore, he decided not to place the bet. Upon hearing this, Mr. Drummond asks Manny what he does with his money, as he knows he gets a paycheck plus tips. Manny explains that he has to send his money to his family because he supports everyone in Mexico. Mr. Drummond agrees to help him by co-signing on a loan stating that if Manny could not pay the loan back, he would cover it for him.

Strengths. Arnold and Manny's willingness to invest to better their lives is indicative of strong achievement orientation. Willis and Kimberly stepped in to help Arnold like a father or mother would; thus demonstrating flexible adaptable roles. Manny's act of sending money home to care for his entire family is indicative of flexible adaptable roles because he acts in the role of father. The lessons their father teaches them about money and business denotes strong achievement orientation. Mr. Drummond

caring for his former housekeeper's children represents a fictive kinship network and the family has a strong kinship bond. Manny shows a strong work orientation.

Season 3, Episode 20, "The Athlete," (ABC, May 13, 1981)

Willis's team wins the baseball playoffs and his father and brother excitedly tell Kimberly about it. The doorbell rings and there is a man at the door looking for Willis. The man at the door is surprised because he expected Willis's father to be black. After getting past his shock, he congratulates Willis on playing such a great game. He is a high school coach who used to play major league baseball. He is interested in recruiting Willis to play for his high school team at Fillmore High, who are six time all-city champions. The school is 45 minutes from the house but the coach promises to make it work. He states that Fillmore graduates major league players and that he ensures all his athletes get good grades. Before leaving, he invites Willis to meet the Mets team. After the coach leaves, Willis promises his father that his schoolwork will not suffer, so Mr. Drummond decides to let Willis attend Fillmore.

Arnold and Willis are in their room recalling the events surrounding Willis's offer and thinking of what the future may hold. Willis tells him that he has homework to do and needs to get started. Arnold tells him that he will do it for him. Arnold soon realizes that Willis's homework is above his grade level. Willis then alerts Arnold that it really does not matter how well he does his homework as the coach is going to make sure he gets good grades regardless. Arnold then asks Willis to help him be a good pitcher like him. Willis walks him through the process of pitching. Kimberly enters the room with a box for Willis. It is from the coach. He gave Willis a new glove and 20 cassette tapes.

When their father comes home from work, he finds the children dancing to the music and asks where they got the tapes. They explain that the gift came from the coach. Mr. Drummond allows them to keep it. The mailman then delivers a certified letter to Mr. Drummond. It is from the board of education alerting him that because they received word that Willis resides in Queens, he will be attending Fillmore. Mr. Drummond is not pleased as the note is saying that they moved and did not. He asks Willis if he knew about it and Willis says yes. Mr. Drummond reminds Willis that what he and the coach are doing is lying and that it is illegal. Willis divulges that half the team lies, stating that they live there. Arnold, in his attempt to support Willis alerts his father that what the coach is doing is great just like how he makes sure that all the players get good grades. Mr. Drummond decides that Willis will not be attending Fillmore and that he is not to have any more contact with the coach. Willis challenges his authority.

His father tries to reason with Willis and explain why it is wrong and that the coach is manipulative and only serving himself. Willis says the coach is a good person and is trying to help him play good ball and have a baseball career. His father states that he does not mind him playing ball as long as he has something to back it up, like a good education. He explains that an education is good for anybody playing professional sports. He explains that thousands of athletes do not make it and even if they do, they will need the education because their career could be over very quickly, especially in cases of injury. Willis states that it is his life and asks his father what gives him the right to say that he cannot go to Fillmore. Mr. Drummond states that the piece of paper that he signed stating that he is his father gives him the right. Willis stated that he is beginning

to see that it is the dumbest paper he ever saw. Arnold challenges Willis and tells his father that Willis did not mean that. Willis replies that maybe he did and that he is going to contact the coach and ask if he can move into his sister's house to go to Fillmore. Mr. Drummond tells Willis they will discuss it later after Willis calms down. Arnold tries to reason with Willis, begging him not to leave and tells him that no matter where he goes, if he is good he can play ball anywhere and be discovered. Willis is not going for it.

His sister and father came back to reason with him. Mr. Drummond reminds him that they are not upset with him even though he is mad with them and they will still be at his game the next day to support him. He blows up and tells them he does not want them there. If they are not going to support his decision, he will make it big on his own.

Willis goes to the game without his family. When he returns home, he alerts his family that they won the game but he got hurt. He was diagnosed with pitcher's elbow. However, Willis is determined to be ready by the time he is to enter Fillmore. Then, the phone rings. It is the coach's assistant calling to let Willis know that he will not be attending the Met's meeting and that he will not be going to Fillmore because his injury is tricky and they do not want to take a chance. Willis apologizes to his father for his behavior and admits that he was right. He asks his brother and sister for forgiveness. His father decides to let the school board know what the coach was doing so that no one will have to be treated like Willis again.

Strengths. Willis's drive about his future to the point of defying his father shows strong achievement orientation. His father wishing to do the right thing and not allow the

coach to give him grades he did not earn shows strong achievement and educational attainment and strong work orientation. The family has a strong kinship bond.

Table 4. Summary of *Diff'rent Strokes* Strengths

<i>Diff'rent Strokes</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S2E17	x	x	x	x	
S3E9	x	x	x	x	
S3E20	x	x		x	

Webster—1982

Webster is about an African-American boy who is orphaned after his parents are killed in an automobile accident.⁹⁸⁰ He is being raised by a white couple, George and Katherine Papadapolis. George is a former teammate of Webster's father Travis, who promised to care for Webster should something happen to his parents.⁹⁸¹ Webster has an uncle, Phillip, who tries to obtain custody of his nephew but later decides not uproot Webster. Uncle Phillip is pursuing a career in Hollywood.⁹⁸²

⁹⁸⁰ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 259.

⁹⁸¹ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 259

⁹⁸² Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 260.

Season 1, Episode 8, "Travis," (ABC, November 11, 1983)

Jerry is teaching aerobics to Ma'am (Katherine) and her friend Ellen. George and Webster come in to get a few things on their way to hit balls. After leaving, Katherine and Ellen have a conversation about Webster. Katherine wants pointers on raising a child because Ellen has been married a while and has three children of her own. Ellen tells Katherine that she does not believe a black child should be raised by a white couple.

When George returns home, Katherine discusses it with George and he tries to make her feel better about by questioning Ellen's expertise in the matter. He finds that not only is Ellen black and a mother of three, she is also a sociologist with a specialty in black child placement who has written a best-selling book on the subject of trauma and culture shock of the victims of the liberal white left. Katherine reveals that she is afraid they are not doing the right thing. George asks if she thinks Webster has a problem with them being white. Katherine state she does not know but she wants to find out. They go to Webster to find out.

They ask Webster if he ever feel like he does not belong where he is in school. He says that once no one would talk to him. Ma'am asks him why and he said that no one was there because she dropped him off by mistake on a Saturday. She asks if he feels like people are staring at them when they go out to walk. Webster looks perplexed. George then decides to stop beating around the bush and tell him that they are white—to that he responds he knows that. So, Ma'am asks if he ever feels embarrassed that they are his guardians. He asks if they are embarrassed by him, to which they answer no. Then he says that he supposes he is not embarrassed either. Ma'am still is not so sure

and Webster has gotten the wrong idea. Based on her reaction, Webster feels that she was not telling the truth and that he does embarrass them.

The next day, Webster discusses it with Melanie, telling her that he thinks he embarrasses them. He thinks he made them uncomfortable. Melanie states that *embarrass* has meanings that may be different from what he thinks. She gets the dictionary and she looks up the word *embarrass*. Of all the definitions she reads, he believes that the issue they are having with him is that he is causing them to be in debt. To make matters better, Webster decides to sell his toys.

Katherine returns from the library with some books Ellen suggested she read about white parents raising black children. In the meantime, kids buying Webster's toys are leaving the apartment. Webster enters the room and he George and Ma'am \$1.87. He explains that he did it in hopes of helping them with their debt. He explains that he does not want them to be embarrassed because he got them in debt. Ma'am tells him that the issue is bigger than money. She tells him that she worries that they are not the right parents from them. She explains that she feels that it might not be the best because they are different colors. Webster states that he does not mind that they are different colors. However, he thinks that she does, and runs away. Ma'am says that they cannot give him what he needs about his culture. George states they may not be able to give him that but he knows they are the right family for Webster.

George calls him back into the room and tells a story that he hopes will settle the issue. He tells them the story about when Webster's father was nervous about his birth. His father and George were in the locker room together discussing what they intended to

name the child and Webster's father asked George to be the godfather. George accepts so long as it is all right with God. Webster's father states that it is fine with God but not so much with his family. He explains that they have an issue with George being white. George asks if there is anyone else who could do it. His father says he is just kidding, that there really is no other family on either side of his or his wife's family. George asks about his brother, and he states that he and his brother, Phillip, do not get along. George asks Travis if he thinks it is okay for a white guy to bring up a black kid. Travis states he does not know. However, he knows that if George is the white guy asked to raise his kid then that is the right decision. If people think they are doing it make a social statement, then let them think that but he is not doing it for that and asks him not to do it for that either. He is doing it because he loves him. George accepts and Travis tells him not to build a nursery as he is going to be around a long time. The doctor comes out to tell them Webster has been born and they celebrate. George explains to them that this is why he is sure they are supposed to take care of Webster.

George tells them if they do not trust him that the right decision was made they should trust Travis Long. Ma'am says it is not going to be easy. George says it would not be easy if the child were white. But he knows they love each other. Webster loved them so much that he sold his toys to help. Ma'am loved Webster so much that she risks losing him if it would be the best thing for Webster. Ma'am says she sees a young man who is past is bedtime. Webster states that she sounds like a mother to him. As he walks away, Ma'am starts to cry, stating that she is just not cut out to be a mother. George asks why and she says she sent him to bed without supper just like the old lady in the shoe.

Strengths. The family dynamics of the Papadapolis family is a fictive kinship.

Webster's father requested that George be Webster's godfather with the intent that if something happened to him and his wife, that George and his wife would raise Webster. Webster has forged a strong kinship bond with George and Katherine. Webster's father's request that George be Webster's godfather is representative of strong religious orientation. Webster's attempt to help his parents demonstrates fluid family roles (child taking on the role a provider to help).

Season 2, Episode 10, "Too Much Class," (ABC, November 30, 1984)

Katherine (Ma'am) and George are in the kitchen talking about Marvin, a classmate of Webster's that has been accepted into the accelerated program at school. George asks where Webster's letter is because he smarter than Marvin is. Ma'am explains that his letter came last week and maybe Webster's is on the way.

Webster is at the Parker's apartment returning some books. Cassie notices that a letter is sticking out of one and asks Webster what it is because it is addressed to his father from the principal's office. Webster explains that it is a letter about his acceptance into the accelerated class. They ask Webster why he is not happy. Webster explains that he does not want to leave his friends. Bill explains that it is wonderful to be accepted and that sometimes change can be scary. Webster says a classmate went to the class two months ago and has not been seen since.

George reaches out to the principal's office to inquire why he was not accepted. Webster shows up with the letter and George is thrilled. Ma'am is not. She wants to discuss if it is the right thing for Webster. George feels that Webster is capable of doing

more. Ma'am states that he is happy where he is. George states that his father came over America with a second grade education and pushed his sons to do better. Now Webster has a chance to do better. George appeals to Webster and states that he does not want him to go into that class just because it would make him the happiest father in the world. He then asks Webster what he wants to do. Webster states unenthusiastically that he wants to go into the accelerated class.

After two weeks in the class, Webster is unhappy. His friends have been hiding in the secret passages of the house to see Webster and he expresses his unhappiness to them. He asks them to leave so he can study. On their way out, Ma'am catches them. She knows they are there because Webster is unhappy. She speaks to George, who is still unreceptive.

Days later, Webster returns from school with a test. He failed his test. He told his parents that his classmates made fun of him because he did not pass. Ma'am tells him that he can go back to his former class. Webster says he cannot because his old friends will know he could not make it in the accelerated class. He tells them that he wishes he could just disappear.

Ma'am goes to Webster and asks him if he has lost his confidence being in the accelerated class. Webster admits that he has. She tells him she has lost her confidence at times. She tells him a story about when she was a ballerina in the *Nutcracker*. She was the tallest but she had landed a role as a sugar plum fairy. She fell and could not go back for the next three performances. However, for the last performance she decided to go back and try again. She fell in that performance, too. However, she decided not to

run away the second time. Because she did not run away, she got a standing ovation. It was kind of like turning her F into an A.

George tells Webster that they talked to his teacher. She has given him permission to do a special project and she will drop the F. It is to be on any event in history to make up failing the history test. Webster does a diorama. A 3-dimensional recreation of life mounted into a shoebox. He tried to get all the details right and hopes everyone can tell what it is. Neither of them could recognize what it is. Webster tells them that the book is a bible. One person has his hand on the bible and is being sworn in. Katherine determined that it is the swearing in of the president. Webster states it is the first president. His parents tell him how proud they are.

The Parkers are visiting with the Papadapolis family and showing them the blueprints for the house. Cassie asks them if Webster is any happier. George states that he is happiest child they know. Katherine states that he is not because he is been pushed into an area he is not ready. Bill states that it is a father's job to push his children.

Webster comes from school and reports that he has been assaulted by his classmate Jack Wayne. George asks what happened and he states the kids made fun of his diorama. He said that he had all the details right and then told them that was how John Hanson looked. George asks him who John Hanson is and Webster states that is what his teacher asked. He stated that he was the first president and the students laughed. George told Webster that John Hanson was not the first president—that George Washington was. He then asked him where he got that information. Webster said he got it from the books Bill gave him. George asks what he gave his son to read and clarifies if

he taught shop. Bill states that John Hanson was the first president when Congress assembled. George Washington was not elected until they signed the Constitution. Webster was right. Ma'am suggests that Webster take his book in to his teacher the next day and she thanks the Parkers for their book. George apologizes.

Webster agrees to take the book to school and now everyone will know how smart he is. He is going to show it to Jack Wayne. Ma'am tells him that he should not gloat but he should smile a lot in confidence. Ma'am tells him that he can go back to his old class. He tells George that now the other kids will know that he is smart because he knew about John Hanson and he misses playing ball with his friends. George agrees, if that is what Webster wants to do.

Strengths. George's desire for Webster to go into the accelerated class represents strong achievement orientation and educational attainment. Webster's desire to be thought of as smart regardless of his desire not to be in the accelerated class is also indicative of this. His willingness to study and to put his friends out so that he can study shows a strong work orientation. The make-up of the family is fictive kinship and they have a strong kinship bond.

Season 2, Episode 20, "What is Art," (ABC, February 22, 1985)

Webster and George are playing golf in the living room and Webster is trying to get George to buy him a skateboard. Ma'am comes home, overhears the conversation, and agrees that George should not buy it. She suggests Webster do something to make some money in addition to his chores. In the kitchen, Ma'am tells George that she and

her partner have discovered an up and coming artist they are going to showcase in their home in four days. She tells him that he is well known but she will not say who he is.

Webster is still trying to do extra chores to raise money. Cassie suggests that Webster go downstairs and see if George has anything he can do. Bill playfully tells him to raise minks for the big bucks. Realistically he tells Webster that he can make money collecting and selling precious metals. Bill decides to show him how to cash in on it.

Upstairs, Ma'am is preparing for the showing and the art piece has arrived. It is a big pile of cans under a fishing net. George thinks it trash. Uncle Phil comes in the house and George tries to show him the art piece. Katherine tries to pull him into the kitchen. He resists and tells Phil that he has to see the piece. He pulls the sheet off the artwork and George starts laughing. Phil obliges him and laughs, too. George says it looks like trash. Phil says it belongs to him. Katherine says Phil is the artist they are promoting. Phil asks George if he really does not like it. George tries to lie and say he does like it, but he just cannot. He tells Phil that it looks like a fishing net was thrown and got cans instead of fish. Phil and Katherine tell George that is what it is supposed to represent. Katherine says the art is designed to make a profound environmental statement. Phil explains that if they do not clean the oceans they will lose a piece of life worth living. Phil thanks everyone for being involved in the project. He leaves to dress for the event. Jerry asks for the pedestal to store it on. When he sees it, he does not like it and decides to go home to get another. They store the artwork in the closet and leave.

Webster comes home from collecting cans. He goes to the closet to hang his coat and finds his Uncle's artwork—thinking that it is just a bunch of cans. He takes them to the trash compactor and crushes them. Bill comes to take him to the recycling place.

Webster now has a good wad of cash. While counting his money, he notices a brochure on the table with his Uncle Phillip's picture on it. He realizes the art that he crushed was his uncle's art. He goes into the kitchen to tell George. George tries to think of a way to help him. He goes to Bill and together they try to recreate the artwork by drinking the cans of liquid that corresponds with the picture of the sculpture.

The re-creation is a success. No one knows it is a recreation—except Uncle Phil. Katherine overhears a conversation between George, Webster, and Bill and finds out that the art is not the original piece. Uncle Phil goes into the kitchen and lets Katherine and the others know that he knows his piece is not the original. Katherine and Phil go into the kitchen to confront the others. Phil tells them he knows because he dedicated his piece to Webster on the side of a can of sardines. George tells the truth and Webster confesses to crushing the original and apologizes as he was trying to raise money for a skateboard. Katherine and Phil understand because that was the purpose of the art—to get the message across that people should recycle to save the environment. Phil explains to Webster that he is a dancer, not sculptor, but was just trying sculpting and liked it. He was not going to do anything serious with it but he created a piece that could help the environment. Phil lets Webster know that he is not upset and loves him.

Strengths. Webster's desire to earn his own money for his skateboard after Ma'am and George decline to buy him one shows strong achievement orientation. The

relationship between George, Katherine, Webster, and Uncle Phil represent fictive kinship and strong kinship bond. Uncle Phil's willingness to create art, which is outside of what he normally does, is indicative of strong work orientation.

Table 5. Summary of Webster Strengths

<i>Webster</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S1E8	x		x		x
S2E10	x	x		x	
S2E20	x	x		x	

The Cosby Show—1984

The Cosby Show is about the family of a successful obstetrician-gynecologist, Heathcliff Huxtable and his wife, Claire, a successful attorney. The upper-middle class family lives in Brooklyn, New York, and the stories are based on the experiences the couple has raising their five children.⁹⁸³ This show was the number one show on television during the 1980s.⁹⁸⁴ Their oldest daughter, Sondra, is a graduate of Princeton. Their daughter, Denise, attended their alma mater, Hillman College, a fictional historical black college and university. Their son, Theo, graduated from New York University and Vanessa attended Lincoln University. The baby of the family was Rudy, who has yet to

⁹⁸³ Gregory Adamo, *African Americans in Television: Behind the Scenes*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2010, 163.

⁹⁸⁴ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballantine Books, 2007, 287.

attend college.⁹⁸⁵ Other main supporting characters include Russell and Anna Huxtable, Heathcliff's parents; Martin Kendall, Denise's husband; Olivia Kendall, Martin's daughter; Elvin Tibideaux, Sondra's husband; Pam Tucker, Claire's cousin.⁹⁸⁶

Season 1, Episode 16, "Jitterbug Break" (NBC, January 31, 1985)

Rudy is in the kitchen with her mother. She is refusing to eat her Brussel sprouts and her mother, Claire, will not let her leave the table until she eats them. Cliff comes into the kitchen to ask Claire when she is going to get ready to go dancing because their friends, Ralph and Marie, are on the way. Cliff demonstrates how he dances. Claire reminds him that he cannot dance and demonstrates how he really moves. He states that it cannot be true because people always stand back and watch. She demonstrates that he dances as if he is about to take flight. Claire then moves toward the stairs to change clothes and she asks Cliff not to let Rudy get up until she finishes her Brussel sprouts. Cliff tries to get Rudy to eat them by telling her a story of a lady who grew old, in the same clothes she had on when she was 5, sitting at that table because she would not eat her vegetables. Cliff tells her not to move until she eats them. He goes upstairs to change and leaves her there.

Meanwhile, Denise tries to borrow money from Theo to buy concert tickets. Denise wants to camp out to get the tickets. Theo tells her she will never get permission to wait outside a stadium over night to get concert tickets. She believes he will tell her it

⁹⁸⁵ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 288.

⁹⁸⁶ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 288.

is okay because she will remind him when he sat outside a stadium in Philadelphia to get World Series tickets. Theo tells her that if she gets their dad to say yes he will give her the money for the ticket and more.

Denise comes downstairs to ask her father for permission, pumping him up with compliments. He immediately asks her what she wants. Denise says that she will ask her mother, to which Cliff responds that whatever it is it must be big in that she wants to ask her mom. Denise tells him she feels that it would be better if she could ask them at the same time. Then the phone rings. It is Ms. Davis, the babysitter, stating that she is not feeling well and will not be able to watch Rudy. Cliff looks at Denise and she tells him she has plans and asks him to ask Theo. Cliff asks Denise, sarcastically, if she really thinks Theo can do it. Denise says yes and that she will be responsible if Theo fails to do a go job watching Rudy.

Cliff tells Theo he is babysitting. Theo tells his father he cannot do it because it is a girl's job. He mentions that when it snows he never asks Denise to shovel snow. Cliff admits he has a point but he does not let him off the hook. Then he tries to argue that he cannot babysit because he is irresponsible. Cliff encourages him by telling him that it takes a big man to admit he has a problem and to try to solve that problem. He tells him that he is offering him the opportunity to solve his problem of being irresponsible. Theo gives in and states that he guesses he has to babysit. After his father tells him that he is proud of him, Theo asks his father how much he is going to be paid. Cliff tells him that back in the day parents did not talk to their kids. A father would tell his son to get up and go plow the field now, and he did it. Occasionally, a son would ask his father how much

he was going to get paid. Then the father would plow over his son. Cliff tells Theo that those days are gone because man has become more civilized and sophisticated. Still inside of him, even though he is sophisticated, when he tells one of his children what to do, and they tell ask him how much he is going to pay them, he wants to go out and buy a plow. He and Theo laugh about it and wrestle a little.

Cliff tells Theo that the first job he has is to get Rudy to eat her vegetables. He tells his father that it is not a problem. Cliff says he and Claire will be home from the dance before Rudy eats her vegetables. Cliff then goes into the living room and asks Denise what she wants. Denise says she wanted to ask him and her mother. He asks again because Claire is getting dressed. She asks him to have an open mind, even though it may be something the kids in his generation did not do. Cliff agrees. Denise asks if she can sleep away from home. Cliff asks if she is sleeping at a friend's house. Denise stays no. He jokingly asks if she is sleeping at a stranger's house. Denise says no. He asks where she is planning to sleep and she says on 32nd Street. She explains that there will be millions of people there and that she will not be doing anything wrong. Cliff tells her he knows because she will not be going. She reminds him that he did something just like it when he was her age. Cliff tells her that it was different because he did not want to go but his father made him. That he was rained on and then he compares it to Noah and the flood. He reiterates that she will not be going. He tells her he loves her, but no.

Vanessa comes downstairs to inquire about Theo babysitting. She tells her father that she is not sure he can do it. He tells Vanessa that it will be fine. Vanessa asks what if there is a fire. Her father says Theo will call the fire department. Vanessa asks but

what if someone breaks in the house. Her father tells her that Theo will unarm them. Then she asks what if the thieves know karate. Her father jokingly says that Theo will die and she will take over. At that moment, Theo comes into the living room and tells his father he cannot get Rudy to eat her Brussel sprouts. He tells Theo that he should eat one, and then she will eat one. He tells his father he does not like Brussel sprouts. Cliff tells Theo that he has to outsmart her. Cliff tells him to tell Rudy she is the big bad wolf and the Brussel sprouts are the three little pigs. Theo thinks she will not fall for it. Cliff tells Theo that he did when he was her age. Theo goes off to try.

Cliff is now dressed and is practicing his dance moves, dancing as though he is having a seizure. Denise comes downstairs and catches her father dancing. She laughs with him and asks him not to do that when her friends arrive. Cliff gets a phone call and goes down to his office to retrieve a chart. The doorbell rings and Denise goes to open it. It is her friends. None of their parents would let them go wait in line for the tickets. They all decided to give their money to another schoolmate and he is going to get all the tickets. Because none of them could go, Denise invites them to hang out at her home. One of her friends tells her they have some new moves to show her. Denise says she wants them to show her father. They ask if they can move the furniture to which Denise replies sure and that she will get her brother to help.

Denise goes to the kitchen to get Theo. He is still trying to get Rudy to eat her vegetables. Denise asks Theo to help so they can dance. Rudy asks Denise if she can watch Rudy. Denise tells her yes if she eats all her Brussel sprouts. She puts them all in her mouth at the same time. They all enter the living room and dance. Some of them are

breakdancing and pop locking (form of dancing where the extremities look locked and pop unlocked to the beat). Cliff comes into the room, sees them, and joins in. Claire and Vanessa watch from the stairs.

The doorbell rings and its Ralph and Marie, who come in and see the kids dancing. Cliff explains that Denise invited some of her friends over to dance. Denise asks her dad if he was impressed. He said it was not bad but then he asks Ralph and Marie to show them some real dancing. After they dance a little number, one of Denise's friends shows Marie some moves and Ralph dances with another of Denise's friends. Cliff joins in and then dances with Claire. After dancing humorously, all over the living room with Claire, he then dances with Denise.

Strengths. Roles are flexible as exhibited by Theo and Denise being expected to babysit, without pay, as members of the family. It is evident as Cliff explains to Vanessa that Theo will be her protector while he and Clare are out. It is also evident in Cliff's asking Theo to make sure Rudy eats her vegetables, a task that Claire as mother was involved in and passed to Cliff, who passed to Theo. Claire and Cliff demonstrate equal family roles in how they discipline Rudy. The family also exhibits strong kinship bonds.

Season 6, Episode 26, "The Storyteller," (NBC, May 3, 1990)

The episode begins with Denise preparing dinner and Olivia asks if she can go to the zoo the next day with her friend Kai. At first, Denise says yes but then remembers that her great aunt, 98-year-old Gram Tee is coming for her birthday and wants the family to accompany her to church. Olivia is upset and debates whether she would be able to go to the zoo or to church. Denise stands her ground telling Olivia that she will be at church.

Gram Tee arrives and speaks to everyone and meets Olivia for the first time—who reiterates her wish—that though it is nice to meet her, she just wants to go to the zoo. Gram Tee laughs and gives her a hug and takes a seat. As the family gathers around her, she reminisces about caring for Heathcliff and his father.

As the family visits more with Gram Tee, Denise and Claire return to the kitchen to check on the dinner. The phone rings and it is Olivia’s friend, Kai. She lets her know that after they leave the zoo they are going to Play Land. Olivia asks again if she can go. Denise puts her foot down, telling her no. Olivia stomps off. Claire reminds Denise that it is not over—that Olivia will do all she can to try to go. Denise does not believe it, thinking that if she acts that way it would be out of character.

In the living room, Theo has joined Gram Tee and they are looking at pictures of his high school graduation. Denise asks Gram Tee about her life as a teacher. She tells the story about their great-great aunt Lucinda, who was a slave, and who was determined to learn how to read. She belonged to the Hawthornes, who had two girls Lucinda played with. The Hawthorne girls felt bad about not her knowing how to read and they taught her to read even though she could get in trouble for doing so. After slavery, she decided to become a teacher. Denise asks if that is what encouraged her to become a teacher. She states she thinks that is just a part of who they were. Denise lets her know of her plans to become a teacher. Gram Tee is elated, remembers that she has already dropped out of college once, and tells her not to drop out of school again. Then she gets on Rudy about her behavior in school and tells her to fly right. Then she encourages Theo to keep trying hard.

Later, Gram Tee takes a nap and Denise and Clarrie are in the kitchen finishing dinner. Olivia comes and says she is too sick to go to church. Denise tells her she can get in the bed until it is time to go to church. Then Olivia says she cannot go to church because she does not have anything to wear. Denise tells her what she will be wearing. Olivia tries to get out of going to church and Denise puts her foot down again. Olivia tries to go into the living room and Cliff tells her to stop because Gram Tee is taking a nap. Then she stomps off and Denise asks her to stop. Olivia goes up the stairs. Claire congratulates Denise for handling Olivia well. Denise reveals she feels bad because she does not want Olivia to feel bad and not like her. Cliff tells her that she should discipline her now so that she will not be angry with her later for the rest of her life.

Olivia goes in the room with Gram Tee, who wakes up. She asks Olivia what is wrong. Olivia states that Denise said she had to go to church with her but she wants to go to the zoo. Gram Tee tells Olivia that she supposes it will not hurt for her to miss one Sunday but she will have to decide for herself. Olivia says okay and begins to walk away. Gram Tee asks her to help her straighten up. While straightening up, Gram Tee begins to sing a song. Olivia asks her what she is singing. Gram Tee said that when she taught school, the children would sing that song while cleaning up for the day. Gram Tee starts singing it again and Olivia asks if she can try. Gram Tee says sure and she and Olivia sing together while straightening up. Olivia has fun with Gram Tee and decides she wants to go to church with her.

The family is around the dinner table following dinner. Gram Tee asked Cliff for her chocolate birthday cake. Cliff teases her as though he does not have it. The family

presents the cake and the celebration begins. The next morning, the family is together in church. The pastor recognizes Gram Tee for her years of service to her community as an educator and has the choir honor her with a special song.

Strengths. The family has a strong religious orientation because of Gram Tee's wish to attend church and have the family accompany her and Denise's insistence that Olivia go to church and not the zoo. Family members have strong educational attainment/achievement orientation because of Aunt Lucinda's desire to learn to read and later becoming a teacher, Gram Tee is a teacher, and Denise's desire to become a teacher. There is a strong work orientation because Gram Tee encourages Rudy and Theo to do well in school and reminds Denise not to drop out again. The pastor and the choir honor Gram Tee for her contribution to education.

Season 7, Episode 10, "It is a Boy," (NBC, November 29, 1990)

Pam and Charmaine discuss Pam's performance in class, outshining Shaniqah Watkins. The conversation moves into how proud her mother would be and how Pam's breakup with her ex-boyfriend Sly was for the best and had a good effect on how she is now performing in school. Pam is glad that she is improved in school but her social life has been affected. Charmaine tells her to start dating again and asks if there is someone she is interested in. Pam states she is interested in Aaron Dexter, who is a new boy in school. Charmaine feels that he may be a high target for Pam to strive for because she believes he is an intellectual. However, she decides that if that is what Pam wants then she should help her get him.

Once they get to school, Charmaine influences Pam to have a conversation with him. Pam acts very coy, so Charmaine takes control of the situation and introduces them. Clearly, Aaron likes Pam as well. He sits with her briefly and when he is about to leave Pam asks if he has read *Henry V*. He tells her he has and he nervously goes into the story and runs on and on. He tells her that he is a Shakespeare buff. Pam admits that she struggles with it and asks him for help. He agrees and begins to tutor her right away. They appear smitten with each other. Aaron is very smart and feels comfortable telling Pam about things he read. Pam is impressed. Later, Aaron walks Pam home. On the stoop, they agree to go on a date.

In the meantime, Cliff is treating a couple, Alfred and Bernice Phelps, who are preparing to have a child. Both are nervous because the mother is older and they are waiting on the results of the amniocentesis. They receive word that everything is fine and they are having a boy. They are ecstatic.

Later, the father-to-be, Alfred, comes back to visit Cliff because he is nervous because he does not believe he will be able to show his son anything about sports, believing that every father should have that experience with his son. He does not believe he will be able to relate to his son. Cliff agrees to help him. The two go outside to play with a basketball. Cliff asks Alfred to dribble the ball, which he does not do well. He reminds him that his son will not be dribbling at 3 or 4 years old. Instead, they will be rolling the ball to each other and he will be impressed. He then asks him to throw the basketball at the goal. He hits the wall, nowhere near the goal.

Cliff leaves Alfred outside practicing and goes to his office to retrieve something. On his way down, he sees Oliva watching a football game. She is engrossed in the game and Cliff approaches her, stating that he did not know that she liked football. She says she loves it and wants to be football player when she is grows up. Cliff reminds her that she said she wanted to be a doctor. She says she wants to do both. Cliff is encouraging and goes down to his office. When he gets back outside, he helps Alfred. His wife joins him in the yard, takes the ball, and makes a basket. Cliff compliments her on making the basket. He learns that she played ball in college and that her mother taught her how to play. Alfred shows concern. Claire joins them in the yard complimenting Bernice on her basket. The four of them engage in a little one-on-one. The women make a basket. Alfred shows concerns.

Alfred stays outside practicing baskets. He finally makes one. Theo comes home, finds Alfred practicing, and tells him that he did a good job making the basket. Alfred tells Theo that his father said that if he continues to practice someday he would be able to impress a five-year-old boy. Theo tells him that when he was five he was not impressed that his father could make baskets. He was more impressed that he could drive a car. Alfred Asks Theo if he thinks he should stop practicing. Theo tells him to keep going but that he was not impressed with how well he played basketball but how the first time he played football and he got injured his father picked him up, fixed his injury, and told him everything would be okay. As he got older, he realized he could beat him at certain sports and he let him win.

Olivia goes outside to relay a message from Claire to Theo. Theo goes in, Olivia sees him throwing the ball, and he hits the backboard. Olivia is impressed and excited that he can hit the backboard. Alfred tells her that one day she will be able to hit it, too.

Later, Theo is shooting baskets and Cliff joins him. Theo asks his dad if he ever let him win at track when he was younger. Cliff says of course, that is how he helped help build his confidence. Theo thanks his father and then tells him that now that he is older he does the same thing for him. He tells him that he could beat him long before he thought he could. Cliff tells Theo that he can still beat him. Theo asks him for a race. Cliff says okay and Theo tries to set a date to race. Cliff jokingly beats around the bush and they go back into the house.

Strengths. Pam has high achievement orientation because of her improved performance in school. The fact that Pam is living with her cousins to go to school while her mother is in California is indicative of her mother's wish for educational attainment and high achievement orientation. Pam living with her cousins as a teenager is representative of flexible family roles (aunt and uncle as mother and father). Cliff's encouragement of Olivia to be whatever she wants denotes high achievement orientation. Cliff expresses, by reminiscing about his experiences with his own son, his high achievement orientation for his children. Claire shows that sexual orientation is skewed when she and Bernice beats Cliff and Alfred at basketball, thus showing flexible roles. The family has taken in Olivia as Denise's stepdaughter and she is totally immersed in the family's life. This demonstrates strong kinship bonds.

Table 6. Summary of *The Cosby Show* Strengths

<i>The Cosby Show</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S1E16	x		x		
S6E26		x		x	x
S7E10	x		x	x	

227—1985

227 is about several families who live in an apartment building (# 227) in Washington, DC.⁹⁸⁷ The main characters are Mary, Lester, and Brenda Jenkins. Other characters include Rose Holloway, Pearl Shay, Calvin Dobbs (Pearl's grandson), Tiffany Holloway (Rose's daughter), and Sondra Clark, the bane of Mary's existence and the sex symbol of the show.⁹⁸⁸ Lester owns a construction company and Mary is a homemaker.⁹⁸⁹ Rose is a widow and owns Building 227. Pearl is retired and Sondra is an executive assistant with aspirations to marry someone wealthy.⁹⁹⁰ Later in the show, Lester and Mary take in a child, Alexandra.⁹⁹¹

⁹⁸⁷ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 1446.

⁹⁸⁸ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 1446.

⁹⁸⁹ William Barlow, Jannette Dates, ed., *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, Washington, DC, Howard University Press, 1993, 300.

⁹⁹⁰ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 309.

⁹⁹¹ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 310.

Season 1, Episode 6, "Pilot," (NBC, October 26, 1985)

Mary is on the stoop talking with Pearl and Rose. Mary is complaining about the garbage not being picked up and the landlord not taking care of the building. Their landlord, Mr. Calloway, takes care of everything in his and Sandra's apartment, but no one else's. They watch the activity in the neighborhood and make comments. Sondra comes home from work early with a headache. Mary questions Sondra about her relationship with Calloway, thinking that she is the reason he does not fix the building because he spends his money on Sondra.

Brenda, Calvin, and Tiffany come home from school. Calvin flirts with Brenda and Mary confronts him about it even though his grandmother, who is raising him, sits in the window. Calvin apologizes and goes to the park. Brenda reluctantly goes into the house, talking back to her mother under her breath. Mary reminds her she is in charge.

Later, Mary is in the basement doing laundry where the other residents have congregated. They are all upset about the work that needs to be done in the building. Mary is trying to rally them together to lodge a complaint. Sondra shows up and tells them that Calloway is in the hospital. Mary does not believe it and thinks it is just a ploy to get out of doing the work needed on the building. She warns the others not to believe Sondra. Later, Calloway dies.

Mary, Rosa, and Pearl are on the stoop discussing Calloway's funeral and what they think is going to happen to the building now that Calloway is gone. Pearl tells Mary and Rose that Calloway left the building to one of his tenants. They immediately think

that the building was left to Sondra. Knowing that Sondra does not like her, Mary starts looking for a new apartment.

Lester comes home to find Mary looking through the classifieds. She explains to him what is going on and he tells her to be nice to Sondra. Brenda comes home and asks to go to the movies. Mary immediately knows that she is trying to meet Calvin and tells her no, then heads down to the basement to do her laundry. Sondra is there.

Mary tries to be nice to Sondra, who insults her as much as she can. She insults her age, looks, and intellect. She then tells Mary that as soon as she inherits the building she will be raising the rent and making changes. Sondra reminds her that her lease is up in November. Mary goes off. Being nice to Sondra is over.

Prior to the reading of the will, Mary calls a building inspector to spite Sondra because she is sure Sondra will get the building. However, Calloway left the building to Rose. He leaves Sondra a portrait of himself. On her way up the steps, she throws a fit. Rose states that she does not know what to do to care for the building. Mary tells her that she will be there to help her. At that point, the building inspector arrives to let the new owner know what he is found. The issues that Mary was hoping would be Sondra's issues have become Rose's problems.

Strengths. The residents of 227 want their living conditions to be better. Their rallying together to get the landlord to fix the building shows strong achievement orientation. Mary and her family, Rose and her daughter, and Calvin and his grandmother exhibit strong kinship bonds.

Season 1, Episode 13, "Mary's Christmas," (NBC, December 14, 1985)

The church loses its lease on its land and must move to a new location. The move will have to take place before Christmas. When Sondra hears about it, she volunteers Lester's company to make the move. She calls Rose and Pearl to meet her at the Jenkins house. Once at the Jenkins home, she and the pastor tell Mary. Mary is not happy with the suggestion because she knows how busy Lester is. When Lester comes home and hears the request, he concurs and states that he will be letting the pastor know. As he goes back to the den to let everyone know, everyone is praying that he will do it. He gives in and agrees to move the church.

Lester makes all the plans for the move and the rest of the family and neighbors plan and prepare for the Christmas play. During the rehearsal for the play at the Jenkins' apartment, the pastor alerts Lester that the church has disappeared. They cannot locate the church. Lester calls his foreman to find out what happened. His foreman tells him that he delegated the job to someone else. The search is on to find the church.

In the meantime, the play participants rehearse. Lester, playing Santa Claus, gives his narrative about the true meaning of Christmas. The rest of the participants rehearse the nativity. The rehearsal breaks down because there is discord among the participants. The pastor, feeling that the discord is a sign, asks Lester to reveal to the rest of them that the church is missing. Sondra blames it on Lester. Mary reminds her that she told her no but she insisted that they do it. Sondra again blames Lester. All are upset that they have no church for Christmas to do the play. Lester is offended and agitated,

even telling visiting carolers to be quiet. The pastor decides they need prayer.

Afterwards, Lester admits that he should have kept a closer eye on his foreman.

Mary comes up with the idea to hold the play but to do it on the vacant lot—an authentic Christmas play outside in a manger. Lester reminds them that the original nativity was outside. Mary reminds them that the church is not brick and mortar but the people and Christ who make the church. Lester agrees to build a platform and they move the play to the vacant lot. As the play is underway, the police show up, having found the church on a planned fast food lot.

Strengths. Lester’s decision to move the church shows strong work and achievement orientations. This entire episode, with the church and Christmas themes, demonstrates a strong religious orientation. The families in the show demonstrate strong kinship bonds.

Season 3, Episode 11, “The Façade,” (NBC, December 12, 1987)

Mary, Rose, Pearl, and Sondra attend a *secrets to success* seminar. While there, Mr. Mortimer, a millionaire, speaks to them about applying success principles to their husbands’ businesses, just as his wife did for him. Following his speech, he states that he is working on a project to build a museum and needs a contractor. Rose mentions that Mary’s husband is a contractor and she lies and says that Lester built a space center. In fact, he built the restaurant next to the space center. Mr. Mortimer also mentions that he has he recently lost his secretary. Sondra overhears it and jumps at the opportunity.

When Lester comes home, Mary is finishing her *secrets to success* mantra. When Lester states he wants to go out for a movie and dinner, Mary tells him it those kinds of

activities the lead to people missing opportunities. Mary then tells him that she met Mr. Mortimer and that she has recommended him to build the new museum. He tells her that his business is not big enough to do it. She asks Lester at least to speak to Mr. Mortimer when he calls. He does not believe that Mr. Mortimer is really going to call but he agrees to speak to him if he does.

Sondra shows up with the keys to a penthouse apartment of a friend across the street. Sondra invites them over to take advantage of a bit of the good life. Mary declines. After Sondra leaves, Mr. Mortimer calls. He wants to stop by before dinner that evening to talk business. Just as she is giving him the address, Pearl reminds her that she has given the impression to Mr. Mortimer that her husband is big shot. Mary remembers that Sondra has her boyfriend's apartment keys and she gives Mr. Mortimer the boyfriend's address instead. Then she goes over to convince Sondra to allow them to use their apartment. Sondra agrees as long as she can stay and take shorthand so she can get the secretary's position. She enlists Pearl and Rose to be the maid and the cook, much to their chagrin.

The Mortimers arrive and they all fall into their roles. However, the plan falls apart almost from the beginning. Neither Rose nor Pearl is pleased with their roles. Sondra and Rose get into it when Rose steps into Sondra's role to answer the phone. Another female friend of Sondra's boyfriend calls. Then Sondra's boyfriend returns home early. Mary tells the Mortimers that he is their son. Sondra then whisks him off to brief him on what is going on. Shortly after that, Lester, who is unaware of the lie, arrives. The Mortimers greet him and start alerting him to what they need from him. He

displays unfamiliarity with the apartment and is shocked when he sees Pearl and Rose acting as maid and cook. Then Sondra's boyfriend comes out of the back room and calls Lester Dad, accepting his role in the farce. At that point, Lester looks at Mary and asks her what is going on.

Mary comes clean and tells Mr. Mortimer that the whole situation is his fault as he had spoken so fondly of what his wife had done for him and his business. She felt that she could do the same thing for her husband. Mr. Mortimer is appalled, but Mrs. Mortimer is impressed and reminds him that she is sure she had done something such as that and she tells him she would do it again if it would help him. Lester admits to Mr. Mortimer that he has a small company not equipped to handle a job that big. Mr. Mortimer extends the opportunity to have Lester work with him on a later project. Mrs. Mortimer reminds him that they have a job coming up the following week that Lester can work on. They shake on it and agree to get together soon. Sondra is disappointed that she did not get the secretarial job, but her boyfriend reveals that he owns a new restaurant and will give her a job there. Mary tries to solidify a deal with him for Lester. Lester stops her in her tracks and discusses the job himself.

Strengths. Mary, Pearl, Rose, and Sondra demonstrate strong achievement orientation by attending the seminar. Mary takes on the role of provider when trying to get Lester a contract showing adaptability of roles. When all the ladies come together to help Mary help Lester, they show an extended family bond. This, as well as the families' relationships shows strong kinship bonds. Lester shows strong work orientation and commitment to work when he alerts the Mortimers that he is a small company unable to

handle a large job like the one Mary was going after at that time (ability to accept help when appropriate).

Table 7. Summary of 227 Strengths

227	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S1E6	x			x	
S1E13	x			x	x
S3E11	x	x	x	x	

Amen—1986

Amen is a show centered on a black church and the exploits of Deacon Ernest Frye and his conflict with Reverend Rueben Gregory.⁹⁹² *Amen* was the first hit television show in history to be based on religion.⁹⁹³ Deacon Frye is vested in his church, First Community Church of Philadelphia, as his father was the founder. Deacon Frye is an attorney and a widower with a grown daughter, Thelma, who lives with him. Thelma dates and eventually marries Rev. Gregory. Other main supporting characters, who are members of the church, include the Hetebrink sisters, Cassietta and Amelia, and Deacon Rolly Forbes.⁹⁹⁴

⁹⁹² Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Film and Television*, Fireside, New York, 1988, 249.

⁹⁹³ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 44.

⁹⁹⁴ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 44.

Season 1, Episode 6, "Retreat, Heck," (NBC, November 15, 1986)

Deacon Frye shows up at the church for a meeting, following a meeting with one of his clients. When he gets there, they are meeting about a retreat. The Deacon is not interested in going and because of his attitude, they are not particular about him going.

When Deacon Frye gets home, Thelma is packing for the retreat. Deacon Frye is opening the mail. The letter is from a former client who originally got 5 months in jail, but when Deacon Frye asked for a retrial, he got 5 years. The letter states that he is getting out of jail on that day and is coming to see Deacon Frye. Deacon Frye is nervous. He decides he is going with everyone to the retreat. The rest of the staff really wants him to stay home. They tell him there are not enough beds. He decides it does not matter and he is going anyway. They all load up in the camper and head to the cabin.

They are exhausted when they arrive at the cabin because Rolly was in charge of directions and it has taken hours to get there. The cabin is dusty, the electricity is not reliable, a window is broken, and there is no wood. Reuben says the handyman will bring wood in the morning. He goes out with a flashlight to check on the ladies and other members. Because it is cold, Deacon Frye suggests they sleep in their clothes. Rolly does his exercises and goes to bed. Deacon Frye lies on the floor amidst Rolly's snoring.

The next morning, Reuben is invigorated by the morning. He wakes Deacon and Rolly. Deacon heads for a shower. Reuben states that he knows the Deacon did not sleep well and hopes a hot shower will help him. Rolly explains that shower will not be hot because it is operated on spring water. The Deacon takes a cold shower; thereby, setting the tone for his day.

Thelma comes in and expresses her desire to have a romantic moment with Reuben. However, Reuben is interested in leading prayer. The Hetebrink sisters come in and offer breakfast—camping rations. They all prepare to leave but Rolly is not ready. He tells them to go ahead and he will catch up. Rolly pulls back a tarp and under it is a picnic basket full of food. As he pulls out a smoked turkey leg, a man enters the cabin. Arnie Samples, Deacon Frye's former client, tells Rolly to let the Deacon know he is looking for him. He found out from the church where the Deacon was and he tracked him down. Samples starts to eye Rolly's turkey leg. Rolly tells him that if he is hungry there is a nice coffee shop at the bottom of the hill.

The nature walk is over and Thelma is upset because she caused a rockslide and her father hurt his ankle running away. They place his ankle in traction and head out to the lodge for the prayer meeting. On the way out the door, Rolly lets the deacon know that someone left him a note. Deacon Frye reads the note from Samples stating he will be back that night. He starts to scream for help. The caretaker comes by to chop wood but the Deacon thinks at first he is Samples and gives him all the money out of his wallet to leave him alone. The caretaker takes the money and leaves to chop the wood. Then a bear comes in the room and licks the deacon's foot. Thelma comes in and tries to get the bear to leave. Eventually it does.

While Thelma is helping the Deacon get up, Samples returns. Deacon Frye decides not to run and faces him, asking him not to hurt Thelma. Samples tells him he did not come to hurt him but to thank him. If he had not been in jail for 5 years, he would not have turned his life around. He learned a trade, is getting married, and is relocating to

California the next day. He had to come tell him thank you before he left. Then Thelma tells her father how proud she is of him and that he is a hero. He says that he is not. He is just someone who loves his little girl.

Strengths. Strong religious orientation is evident throughout this episode. The church retreat, the pastor (Reuben) wishing to pray instead of being romantic, the group gathering for prayer meeting are all indicative of this strength. Thelma's concern that she may be responsible for her father's injuries denotes strong kinship bonds. Deacon Frye stating that he wanted Samples to leave Thelma alone and then later confessing his protection of his daughter because he loved her also denotes strong kinship bonds. The retreat is for the church to plan and work on doing better. This demonstrates strong achievement and work orientations.

Season 2, Episode 14, "To Catch a Thief," (NBC, January 23, 1988)

Deacon Frye is spoiling his foster granddaughter, Jeanette. The Hetebrinks and Reuben come to discuss church business and Thelma tries to put Jeanette to bed but the Hetebrink sisters have not seen her in a few days and keep her with them. Reuben goes over the speech he is going to give to ask the church to raise money. Deacon Frye tells him that the speech is boring. Reuben decides to show excitement early in the speech. His second try is much better and more powerful. Reuben asks if he can count on a donation of \$50 dollars because he helped light the fire. He gives him \$100. Jeanette asks if she can help take up the money. Everybody is happy that she wants to help. As Reuben leaves, the deacon asks if the speech was a trial run. Reuben said it was. The deacon states that the \$100 he gave him was a trial as well.

The next day, Reuben gives the speech. When they gather in the pastor's study, they are emptying the donation boxes. Deacon Frye believes that Jeanette's box will be full of cash. When he opens the box, it is empty. The Hetebrink sisters begin to question Deacon Frye about the money. He gets offended because he feels they are trying to accuse Jeanette of being a thief. He gets upset and storms out the office.

When he gets home, he tells Thelma what has happened. Thelma is surprised that Reuben did not come to Jeanette's rescue. She decides she is going to give him up but her father better be sure that he did everything he said he did. Jeanette comes home from church with a shopping bag. It is a gift for Thelma. Thelma hugs Jeanette. Jeanette runs off. Inside the bag is a bottle of perfume with the price tag still on it. The perfume costs \$120. Thelma thinks they should talk to her. Deacon Frye is trying to defend her.

The Hetebrinks and Reuben stop by to question Jeanette. Deacon Frye does not wish to cross-examine his granddaughter. When Jeanette comes downstairs, she asks the Hetebrinks if Thelma showed them her gift. They see it cost \$120. Thelma breaks down, cries, and asks her father to question Jeanette. He asks Jeanette if she took the money. She says no. The group is not satisfied, so he asks if she was telling the truth. She says yes. Deacon Frye then throws his guests out of the house.

The next day he goes to the church to resign and pack his things. Reuben tells him he is over reacting but the Deacon stands firm. A man comes by to leave an envelope. The Deacon, angry about how his granddaughter was accused, unfairly takes his anger out on the man with the envelope. As the man is leaving, Reuben asks the man what is in the envelope. He admits to taking the money. He states he was down on his

luck and took the money. Deacon Frye is ecstatic. He gives the man \$100 for being honest. After the man leaves, he chastises the Hetebrinks and Reuben. They reluctantly have to admit the Deacon was right and apologize. The Deacon gloats and leaves.

Back at home, the Deacon is teaching Jeanette how to play gin rummy. Thelma enters the room and asks her father to ask Jeanette where she got the money. Her father says they are playing and can talk about it later. Thelma wants to talk now. She tells Jeanette that she left the tag on the perfume by mistake and she notices how much it cost. Jeanette states she did not leave it on by mistake—when she spends \$120 on a gift for someone she wants that person to know how much it cost. Thelma asked Jeanette where she got the money for the perfume. She said she had been saving it since she was a little girl. It was her runaway money—when you are in foster care, you never know when you might have to run away. Because she found Thelma and Deacon Frye, she did not need to run away anymore. Therefore, she bought Thelma a gift.

Strengths. Deacon Frye's belief in Jeanette is representative of strong kinship bonds. Jeanette's willingness to show her love to Thelma and use her runaway fund to buy her a gift shows strong kinship bonds as well. Deacon Frye, Thelma, and the rest of the church family have embraced Jeanette as one of their own and Deacon Frye called her his granddaughter. This is a strong kinship bond in a fictive kinship relationship. The church members function like a family and represent a fictive kinship bond as well. The church fundraiser shows strong achievement and work orientations. The fact that the show is based on the lives of the church's members denotes strong religious orientation.

Season, 3 Episode 6, "The Minister's Wife," NBC, (November 19, 1988)

Reuben delivers a sermon about marriage and everyone is gathering in the reverend's office following service. Deacon Frye comes into the room after trying to fix the pipes in the basement. The basement has about two feet of water but the Deacon does not want to pay a repairman to fix it, believing he can fix it himself. A visiting pastor, Rev. Crawford, and his wife Sarah stop in the office as well to greet Reuben before they leave. They compliment him on his sermon. Cassietta compliments Mrs. Crawford on her dress and asks where she bought it. She states that she made it and that she makes all of her clothes. Reuben comments that Rev. Crawford is lucky to have a wife like Sarah. Thelma feels inadequate compared to her and as though she will not be a good minister's wife. She makes up her mind to prepare to be a good minister's wife by any means.

The next day, Deacon Frye is still trying to fix the pipes. Thelma shows up and asks the Hetebrinks if they have something for her to do. They tell her not at the moment. Then Reuben comes out of his office and she bombards him with requests to help. Everything she asks to help with he reports is already covered. Just as she is about to leave, the Hetebrink sisters tell her that the Reverend is very busy and that he is counseling Mrs. Jackson for grief. In Reuben's office, Mrs. Jackson thanks Reuben for his help and tells him that she no longer needs counseling. Thelma, anxious to show Reuben that she can be a good pastor's wife, barges into the room and begins to talk to Mrs. Jackson about how she must really miss her husband and how bad she must feel now that her husband is gone. Thelma is so emotional that she affects Mrs. Jackson, who breaks down in grief. Reuben has to console her. Thelma leaves the room thinking she

done a good deed and reports that Mrs. Jackson will never get over her husband. Just as she calms down, the phone rings, and Amelia answers the phone. It is Mrs. Crawford calling to plan the interfaith dinner. Thelma takes the phone and tells Mrs. Crawford that she will be planning the interfaith dinner instead.

Back at home, Thelma is making her dress. She is using her father as a mannequin. A plumber calls to give the deacon a quote because the job has become too much for him. Deacon Frye does not like the quote and decides to do it himself. Thelma continues to make her dress. The Hetebrink sisters drop by to update her on the planning.

At the dinner, everybody is impressed with how well planned the event was. It is being held in the churchyard under a tent. Reuben notices that the ground is soggy, to which Deacon Frye states the sprinklers must have stayed on all night. Reuben reminds him that they do not have a sprinkler. They proceed with the night's program. After Reuben expresses his gratitude for the evening and thanks Deacon Frye for fixing the pipes, he asks the guests to join hands so that they can pray. As they begin to pray, everyone starts to sink into the ground.

Thelma is heartbroken because she really wanted to be a wife like Mrs. Crawford. Reuben tells her that Mrs. Crawford is not for him. He wants a woman who is bright, sweet, and sensitive, has a good sense of humor, cannot cook, and does not make her own clothes. Thelma asks if he is proposing. He states no but he wanted her to know the kind of women he is seeking. He tells her that she is the woman for him.

Strengths. The fact that Deacon Frye would allow Thelma to use him as mannequin shows he will do anything for his daughter, demonstrating strong kinship

bonds. It is also indicative of adaptability of family roles. Thelma's desire to plan the dinner to make an impression on Reuben and prove she would be a good pastor's wife shows strong achievement orientation. Her work to plan and put on the event shows strong work orientation. The fact the show is based around what happens in church shows strong religious orientation.

Table 8. Summary of *Amen* Strengths

<i>Amen</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S1E6	x	x		x	x
S2E14	x	x		x	x
S3E6	x	x	x	x	x

Summary

The analyses confirm that shows depicting African-American families between 1980 and 1989 did portray strengths of African-American families, thus making the representations true depictions of African-American families. The 1980s ushered in shows with black characters that were appealing to mainstream audiences giving black people and black life visibility and providing a platform for black people to become creators, directors, and owners of television entertainment in the 1990s.⁹⁹⁵

⁹⁹⁵ Gregory Adamo, *African Americans in Television; Behind the Scenes*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2010, 5.

CHAPTER 5

BLACK FAMILY TELEVISION SHOWS BETWEEN 1990 AND 2000

This chapter continues the analysis of black family television shows into the next decade—between 1990 and 2000. Two research questions pertaining to the portrayal of African-American families on major network television between 1980 and 2000 were examined.

RQ1. Were there any indications of characteristics of realistic positive black families depicted on major network television between 1980 and 2000 in the shows selected for review?

RQ2. If a black family was portrayed on television, was it done so in a way that depicts the strengths and success of that family?

The following episode summaries of black family television shows between 1990 and 2000 are written in present tense as if they are being watched in real time. The shows are categorized by the year they were placed in the Top 30 on a major network. Family strengths of the characters' depictions were determined using the definition noted in the methodology and are charted at the end of each episode summary.

A Different World—1987

A Different World is a spin-off of *The Cosby Show*. Originally based on Denise Huxtable's college experience at Hillman College, her roommates were Jaleesa, an older divorcee, and Maggie, one of the few white students on campus.⁹⁹⁶ Schoolmates

⁹⁹⁶ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 316.

included Dewayne Wayne, Ron Johnson, Millie, and Whitley Gilbert. Eventually Denise leaves Hillman and Whitley becomes the main character. The show depicts the lives of the students and staff. Additional schoolmates and school employees include Kimberly Reese, Freddie Brookes, Terrance Taylor, Colonel Taylor, Mr. Vernon Gaines, Lettie Bostic, and Walter Oakes.⁹⁹⁷

Season 3, Episode 16, “A World Alike Season,” (NBC, February 15, 1990)

This episode begins with Whitley preparing to perform an Alvin Ailey dance interpretation for a South Africa benefit performance. She meets Julian, who knows Freddie, as they are preparing a boycott of companies that have not divested their investments in Africa. Freddie has Walter, a graduate student and resident director, checkout annual reports on one of the companies that employs many of the students and donates large amounts of funding to the college, including paying for the library.

Kim has received a scholarship and an internship from a pharmaceutical company and can now quit her job at The Pit, the campus grill. She alerts Mr. Gaines, The Pit’s owner, that she is quitting and will train her replacement during her last 2 weeks. Kim returns to discuss her plans with Whitley. Freddie alerts Kim and Whitley that she has found out that the company she is investigating has not divested from South Africa as they had stated, and that they owned several subsidiaries, including the company that has provided Kim’s scholarship and internship. Julian and Freddie plan to ask the school to boycott the company and to cut their financial ties with company. Whitley asks Julian

⁹⁹⁷ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 357.

not to push the boycott until after her roommate Kim has cashed her first check from her scholarship. Julian declines to do so.

At the student meeting, Julian and Freddie present their plan, to which most of the students, including the African students, disagree. South African students Kobie and Mbubunni want the school to continue taking the money because the South African people will benefit. South Africa can learn from the Hillman students and graduates that the way things are is not the way things have to be. This agreement makes it acceptable for Kim to take the scholarship. However, Kim feels obligated not to do so. She heads back to The Pit to get her old job back. When she arrives, Mr. Gaines is packing all the orange soda syrup because it is manufactured by the company that has not divested its investments in South Africa. He gladly gives Kim her job back, sort of expecting that she would do the right thing.

Strengths. Whitley's concern for Kim's scholarship and her loyalty to Kim shows a strong kinship bond. All students show strong achievement and work orientations. There are community kinship bonds between the students, staff, and instructors. They all support each other, as Kim showed by giving up her scholarship and Mr. Gaines showed by packing up his orange syrup to support the South African divestment movement.

Season 3, Episode 19, "Hillman is not Through with You Yet," (NBC, March 8, 1990)

Whitley and Jalisa are preparing to graduate and are interviewing for jobs. During Whitley's job search activities, Hillman is holding their prospective student weekend. Kim and Whitley will be hosting Ron Johnson's sister, Rachel. Ron and Dewayne will be hosting Zac Duncan, who is mathematics whiz, just like Dewayne. Ron

takes on the role of Rachel's father by becoming over-protective after witnessing the reaction of Dewayne, Zac, and others to his sister. While trying to deter his sister from attending a frat party, a woman Ron has had a romantic encounter with kisses him and expresses her excitement about seeing him later at the same party. His sister, witnessing the exchange following Ron's anti-frat party rant, says that it is unfair of him not to allow her to go. He then lies and says he met the woman who kissed him at bible study. She decides she is going anyway. Later, after a sporting activity, Rachel gets hurt and Ron goes overboard. When she prepares to change clothes for an outing with her peers, Ron, in a fatherly tone, decides she will not be going but will instead be going with him, upsetting Rachel. Dewayne invites Rachel to dinner to have her talk to her brother and make amends. She thanks her brother for the role he played when she was growing up and reassures him that she can take care of herself.

While Rachel is unpacking, she talks to Whitley about their shared interest in art and finds out that Rachel intends to major in art, also. Later, Whitley returns from yet another job interview and announces she has a job as a perfume spray girl. During their conversation, Rachel alerts the two that she has an 8-year plan for college and postgraduation employment. She intends to become a corporate art buyer. Rachel influences Whitley to follow the same path.

Whitley has her mother arrange an interview at E.H. Wright and Associates for an interview as an art buyer. However, while the interviewer reviews her resume he notes that while she has the art background, she does not have the business grades or experience to be a buyer. However, he agrees to give her a summer internship if she will

agree to stay at school an extra year to take the classes to support being an art buyer.

After returning to campus, she talks to Jalisa and Kim about it, as she does not want to stay the extra year. The graduation invitations have been sent and if she stays, her mother will be embarrassed. Jalisa tells Whitley about her experience as an older college student returning to college and staying an extra year in order to encourage Whitley to stay.

Strengths. Ron's role as father is flexible and adaptable. He steps in as a father role to protect Rachel. Whitley, Rachel, Zac, and Jalisa exhibit strong orientation in advancement, achievement, and work. Ron's mention of bible study is a minor indication that there is some religious orientation. Kim, Dewayne, and Jalisa's concern about each other denotes a familial-like bond and shows strong kinship orientation.

Season, 4 Episode 14, "Risk Around the Dollar," (NBC, February 7, 1991)

Whitley has money issues and is unable to pay her rent. She is encouraged to get a job. In the interim, she uses her tuition money from her father to pay the rent. After attempting to hold a job at a funeral home doing makeup, she decides it is not for her and joins forces with Ron to throw a party. She uses more of her tuition money as an investment in Ron's venture. When overcrowding at the party causes Ron and her to pay penalties for code violations, she and Ron have to use the money earned to pay the fines. Whitley makes the decision to pawn her jewelry, which are family heirlooms she has inherited from her ascendants. Dewayne (her boyfriend) comes to her rescue by pawning her computer, which he has named Poindexter, to bail her out. Not to be a burden to Dewayne, she pawns her jewelry anyway and uses Dewayne's monetary gift to buy his computer back. She then returns to the job at the funeral home.

In the meantime, Terrance (Colonel Taylor's son) arrives back Washington, DC. His father financed the trip so he could visit the Smithsonian for enlightenment. Instead, Terrance attended a rally on Howard's campus that has influenced him to become a Muslim. He is committed to the religion but is struggling to apply the doctrine. At first, Colonel Taylor is skeptical of Terrance's commitment and decision to become a Muslim. Eventually he supports his decision as he witnesses his desire to learn more about the faith. Terrance talks to his father about reading more about the religion, including a copy of the Koran his father gave him. His father further encourages him to read other interpretations of the religion.

Strengths. The story lines all takes place at an institution of higher learning. All the characters exhibit strong achievement and work orientations. They have made a family for themselves away from their own families and they help each other personally and scholastically. This shows a strong family bond. Colonel Taylor's desire for his son to be enlightened and his son's desire to be enlightened shows a strong kinship bond between father and son and a strong achievement orientation. Terrance's commitment to Islam shows strong religions orientation. Whitley's desire to get a job or throw a party to earn money to be able to pay her own rent and her tuition shows strong work and achievement orientations.

Table 9. Summary of *A Different World* Strengths

<i>A Different World</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S3E16	x	x		x	
S3E19	x	x	x	x	x
S4E14	x	x		x	x

Family Matters—1990

Family Matters is about a suburban Chicago family. The father, Carl Winslow, is a police officer and his wife, Harriett, was a former elevator operator who appeared on the show *Perfect Strangers*.⁹⁹⁸ The Winslows have a son, Eddie, and two daughters, Laura and Judy. Judy is eventually written out of the show. Other family members included Carl's mother Estelle, Harriett's sister, Rachel, and her son, Richie. Additional main supporting characters include a neighbor, Steven Urkel, who has a crush on Laura.⁹⁹⁹

Season 2, Episode 16, "Do the Right Thing," (ABC, January 14, 1991)

Laura is ecstatic that basketball player, Todd, is the new waiter at her Aunt Rachel's diner. Steve, who is in love with Laura, is not happy about Todd working there. Soon, Todd and Laura begin to date. In addition, Todd and Laura asked Steve to tutor him so that Todd can stay on the team. As Steve ponders doing it, a devil and an angel appear. The devil tries to convince Steve to tutor Todd but give him the wrong answers

⁹⁹⁸ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballantine Books, 2007, 453, 454.

⁹⁹⁹ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballantine Books, 2007, 453.

so that he will no longer be interested in him. The angel reminds him that if he does that Laura will no longer respect him. He decides to tutor him and give him the correct answers. The Angel directs a chorus of hallelujah.

Carl finds a bracelet in the park that is worth over \$15,000. If no one claims it in 30 days, it belongs to him. He and Harriett intend to go on a long-awaited cruise. To ensure that no one claims it, he really does not put forth effort to locate the owner. His conscious gets the best of him and he debates the issue that takes the form of an angel and a devil. When he decides to do the right thing and really put forth an effort to locate the owner, the angel directs a hallelujah chorus and the devil disappears.

The 30 days pass and just when they thought they were in the clear and the bracelet is theirs, the owner shows up and claims the bracelet, giving them a \$20 reward. In addition, the owner divulges that the bracelet is really a collar belonging to her cat. Laura calls Steve by phone to let him know that Todd passed his class and that they broke up. When he enquires about why they broke up, she says that all he knows and talks about is basketball. Steve tries to get her to admit that she prefers brains to brawn. She admits she wants both.

Strengths. The debate between the angel and the devil in both Steve and Carl denotes religious orientation. The fact that Todd wishes to be tutored to improve his grades suggests a strong achievement orientation. Laura, Steve, Todd, and Rachel working at Rachel's Place shows strong work orientation. The family in this series demonstrates strong kinship bonds. The family includes immediate family members and extended family members who all work together to help the family unit function well.

Season 3, Episode 12, "A Pair of Ladies," (ABC, December 6, 1991)

Rachel, Harriett's sister, is having employee issues at her restaurant and Laura and Harriett agree to help. Rachel is glad to have Laura's help but really is not happy Harriett has agreed, as they do not work well together. Rachel feels Harriett can be abrasive. However, she needs her help and lets her come.

Carl has co-workers over to play poker; however, one player calls to say he will not make it because his wife is in labor. Steve, the Winslow's neighbor, comes in looking for Laura who is working at the diner. He tells Carl that he wanted Laura to go with him to purchase a new accordion and flashes the money he has saved to buy it. Carl's boss, Lt. Murtaugh, noticing the roll of money, encourages Steve to stay for a friendly game, even though Steve has never played. Steve loses all his money and upon leaving, accepts his loss but asks for the money back because he was told it was a friendly game. Lt. Murtaugh does not give Steve his money back. Steve tries to assault the Lieutenant for keeping his money. Carl gives Steve his money back, stating that Steve was unaware of how to play the game and he was a guest in his home so he felt responsible. Steve accepts at first, noting that Carl really is his friend and cares for him, but he changes his mind. He decides to play him again using the money he got from Carl. This time, he wins all his and Carl's money back, plus Lt. Murtaugh's prized watch. However, Steve gives him his watch back after he sees how distraught he is over losing it, stating that he plays for fun.

Rachel and Harriett fight at the diner when Harriett rearranges the pantry, verbally abuses her customers, and fires her cook. Rachel then fires Harriett, just as a 35-member

baseball team enters the diner. Harriett is asked to stay and they, along with Rachel, serve the team. Afterward, Harriett realizes she has underestimated the job Rachel does. She apologizes for her treatment of her and the staff. She reminds her of how she was always the big sister looking after her little sister. Now she realizes that Rachel can look out for herself. Rachel thanks Harriett for teaching her how to take care of herself.

Strengths. Rachel's ownership of the restaurant and her sister and niece's willingness to help her be successful is indicative of strong work and achievement orientations. Carl's willingness to give Steve the \$385 dollars he lost just because he is a friend and a guest in his home that was misled by his supervisor a fictive kin relationship. Harriett's conversation with Rachel about how she took care of Rachel and how Rachel learned to care for herself from Harriett shows flexible roles in families.

Season 5, Episode 5, "Money Out the Window," (ABC, October 22, 1993)

The show starts with Laura complaining about not getting enough sleep. She tells her mother that she just staying up too long studying. Eddie is on his way out the house when his father stops him and reminds him that they are supposed to be working on their stamp collection together. Eddie tells him he has plans to go to his friend Waldo's house for a get-well party for his mom, who just had surgery to lift her buttocks. Eddie leaves.

Both Laura and Eddie are looking for ways to make some money. Laura wants a car and Eddie wants some cash. Laura takes an additional job to cover the cost of the car. Eddie however is convinced by his friends Waldo and Weasel to bet on a series of sports games, using a gangster bookie to place the bets. Weasel promises to cover the bets if

Eddie should lose. In the meantime, Laura has taken a job that requires her to work from midnight to 4 am. She sneaks out of the house nightly to make her shift.

All but two of the teams Eddie bets on lose. Weasel admits he lied about helping Eddie and takes the offer off the table. His friend Steve, who wanted Eddie not to place the bet, reaches out to the bookie to alert him that Eddie will need to pay the bet off in increments, as he does not have the money. The bookie pays him a visit and tells him he has until the next day to pay the debt. Eddie decides to sell a rare stamp that he and his father collected. Steve tries to stop him but he decides to do it anyway.

Laura is caught climbing back in her window. She has to come clean and let her mother know what she has been doing. Her mother scolds her for taking such an unsafe chance to earn money for a car. She tells her to quit the job and that she and her father will help her get the car because they want to help.

Eddie gets the money for the stamp without telling his father. However, his father finds out about the stamp and buys it back. His father asked the stamp shop owner to let him know if another stamp like the one he already had ever becomes available. He calls him to tell him it has, and his father purchases it – not knowing that it was his stamp. When Eddie comes home from work, his father is sitting at the kitchen table about to look over his stamp collection. Eddie gets nervous but is surprised when he sees that the stamp was there. He prepares to let his father believe that all is well, but his father convinces him to tell the truth. He chastises Eddie for gambling and making stupid decisions. Eddie is then grounded. He apologizes to his father for the incident, promising to pay him back for the stamp repurchase.

Strengths. Eddie and Laura’s desire to earn money independently of their parents indicates strong achievement orientation. Laura’s willingness to sneak out of the house to work late nights is indicative of her strong work orientation. Steve’s intercession on Eddie’s behalf indicates a fictive kinship bond—the action is something that a family member would do to help another member. Harriett’s decision to help Laura with her car purchase so she can concentrate on her education as a way of rewarding her for her hard work displays a strong kinship bond and her desire for achievement for her children. Car’s disappointment in his son for selling the stamp and then punishing him for his actions, and Eddie’s apology for disappointing his father and agreeing to pay him back displays strong kinship bonds.

Table 10. Summary of *Family Matters* Strengths

<i>Family Matters</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S2E16	x	x		x	x
S3E12	x	x	x	x	
S5E5	x	x		x	

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air—1991

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air is about a Philadelphia teen named Will who, after a brush with trouble, is sent to Bel-Air to live with his wealthy aunt and uncle and their

family.¹⁰⁰⁰ Philip Banks, an attorney, is married to Will's aunt, Vivian. Their two oldest children, Carlton and Hilary, are assimilated into Bel-Air life. Carlton is a preppy student consumed with school and future career goals. Hilary is a persnickety young adult who lives to shop. Their youngest child, Ashley, is unaffected by Bel-Air life and Will connects with her the most. The Banks' butler, Geoffrey, is part of the family.¹⁰⁰¹ This show is based on the life of noted music and media producer Benny Medina.¹⁰⁰²

Season 1, Episode 21, "Love at First Fight," (NBC, February 15, 1991)

Will and Carlton are watching a show and Ashley comes into the room. She teases them about not having a date in a long time. When she leaves the room, they agree and confirm with each that they have not had a date in a long time. So much so, the school nurse looks good. Aunt Viv comes into the room and tells them that Kayla, a student, is on the way and they should behave. They both perk up when she says girl. Aunt Viv says that she is a scholar and a very nice girl. Will and Carlton think that based on Aunt Viv's description that she is ugly. However when she arrives, she very pretty and they both are attracted to her.

They sit in the parlor for drinks and the family discovers that she is from New York. Hilary is impressed and calls off some of her favorite places, such as Fifth Avenue and the Plaza Hotel. Hillary asks where she is from and Kayla responds that she is from Harlem. Hillary, unimpressed, asks if it is nice. Aunt Viv tells them that she was

¹⁰⁰⁰ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 383.

¹⁰⁰¹ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 384.

¹⁰⁰² Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, Farah, Strass, and Giroux, New York, 2001, 385.

valedictorian of her class. Geoffrey enters and tells them dinner is ready. Kayla asks Will who the English guy is. Will says he cuts a good fade do he keeps him around. Kayla tells him that makes him large, and walks off. Will and Carlton watch her as she walks away and comment on how fine she is. Carlton tells Will that he does not have a chance with her because she is a college student and is too old for him. Will says she is from Harlem, as he is. Where he comes from age does not matter, 17, 21, 33, they are all in the same grade.

At the dinner table, Kayla tells Aunt Viv that her class is her favorite. Aunt Viv asks her what her favorite play is and she answers *Henry V*. Will tries to talk to her about the play but displays his lack of knowledge. Kayla ignores him and states the *Henry V* deals with Shakespeare's most interesting themes. Geoffrey states that he always favored *Romeo and Juliet*, which is based on the theme of servants being superior over those they serve. Uncle Phil states his favorite is *King Lear*, the story of a strong loving father destroyed by his children. Hillary states she likes *Hamlet*. Surprised, her mother asks her why. Hillary states she loves Mel Gibson in tights. Kayla responds that *Hamlet* has some of Shakespeare's most compelling poetry. Will asks Kayla if she knows who else is a compelling poet—the Intelligent Hoodlum. She tells her she just got his new tape and it is upstairs and that he drops science (knowledge). Kayla states that she does not think they will be covering him this semester. Carlton tells Will he is doing great. Ashley states that she just went to a play based on a Shakespeare play called *Kiss Me Kate*. Kayla says it was based on *Taming of the Shrew*.

Will tries again to hit on Kayla, telling her that back home in Philly they once had a wild shrew. He said it just crawled out from under the kitchen sink. It was big and it stole a Smithfield ham from his Uncle Leroy. Kayla tells Will that she does not want to be rude, but she was invited to her English professor's home, was enjoying an interesting discussion, and did not come to discuss rodents. She tells him that if he is doing it for her benefit she thinks it is juvenile and she is not in high school. Carlton teases him.

Later, Aunt Viv searches for her car keys. Uncle Phil tells her that he always suggests that she track her steps. He asks her where was the last place she saw them. She tells him when she gave them to him to borrow her car. Hilary says that they should use her foolproof system for never losing her car keys. She went down to the hardware store and had 30 copies made. Then she repeats the copying of the keys the following month. She then tells them that she does the same thing with their house key. Her father Uncle Phil asks her to clarify that there are house keys all over Los Angeles. She tells him not to worry, their name and address is on all of them. Aunt Viv keeps looking and tells Phillip that Kayla is coming and she promised her a poetry reading at USC. She says this just as Will comes into room. Will states that he does not want to hear her name again and that he is leaving. Aunt Viv says fine and that they do not have to talk about it. Then he starts to explain his problem with her, and Uncle Phil reminds him that he does not want to talk about it. The doorbell rings and Aunt Viv lets Kayla in. Will says he is leaving but instead sits down on the couch. Geoffrey announces her. Aunt Viv tells her that they will leave as soon as she finds the car keys. Ashley suggests that maybe they should just drive around town and look for Hillary's keys.

Will apologizes to Kayla and tells her that he took it too far. He tells her that he has one question. He asks her if she has already been that stuck up. She calls him stuck up. They start insulting each other with *your mama* jokes. Just before Will tells her the last joke, he cannot and tells her that she is so fine, and then leans in for a kiss. Then he tells her they cannot kiss because he just had a chilidog.

Will stops by Kayla's room and gives her a 2-week anniversary gift of flowers. He teases her about studying so hard. She says that she feels like sometimes her head is going to bust. She tells him she has a lot of studying. He says that he has something to do. She pulls a chair up and stares at her, studying her. Then he tells her he is ready for the test. She tells him she is preparing for an exam. Will asks her to let him help her. She gives him the book and tells him to read off some passages and let her see if she can name the play. She is able to identify the plays and Will is impressed. She tells him it is nothing really. The other students have been studying Shakespeare since the ninth grade and she is just catching up. Will tells her to stop tripping because she is the smartest girl he has ever known. He tells her that when she speaks million dollar words, it makes his liver quiver. She thanks him and tells him he is the only boy she has ever been with who appreciates her being Shakespearian. Kayla's roommate comes in, tells her about a frat party, and asks if she will go. She says that she probably will not. Will asks her why not. She states she feels like she is on the moon because there was nobody she could talk to. Will tells her it is okay and that she can come to a party at his fraternity – Sigma Phi.

Will thinks he is in love and is singing the theme from *Love Boat*. Hillary congratulates him on dating an older woman. Will states that you feel like a million

bucks when you have a fantastic woman by your side. Carlton comes in with a headache. Will tells him that when he has a headache, Kayla massages his head and back with baby oil. Carlton tells Will he does not want to hear it. He lets his father know he is headed to school. His father tells him it is too early. He tells him he knows but the girls volleyball team practices in the morning and sometimes they wear those little shorts. He dad looks at him strangely and Carlton answers that he knows he is pitiful and walks off. Kayla comes in and greets Will. Just as he sits down Aunt Viv comes in and speaks to Kayla. She tells Kayla that she was not in class yesterday. She apologizes for not being there as she has been busy. She tells her she will be there next time. She asks Will if he will be accompanying her to the English department party. She tells him good-bye and leaves.

Aunt Viv tells Will that she notices that Kayla has been spending a lot of time with him. Aunt Viv tells Will that she just graded Kayla's Shakespeare exam and she scored far less than what she used to score. She is going to have to give her a D. Will tries to act as if it is no big deal, that it is just one bad grade. Aunt Viv informs him that if he falls they are there to help him. But, if Kayla falls, she could lose her scholarship and have to leave school. She asks Will to give her some time alone. Will tells her that he has been chasing chicken-head girls for months and now that he finally has found a level-headed girl she wants him to leave her alone. Uncle Phil tells him that he knows he cares for Kayla but if he feels that much for her to do what is best for her. Will feels he is best for her because he makes her happy. He helps her fit in and feel better. Aunt Viv tells him this is her life and it could mean the difference between Dr. Kayla Samuels and the Kayla who cleans the hospital.

At the mixer, she and Will hobnob. Aunt Viv sees Kayla and Will at the party and she tells Kayla that she is not obligated to stay if she has work to do. Kayla tells her she is taking a little break. Aunt Viv says her goodbyes and leaves. Kayla states that the party is boring and they can go back to her room and have some fun because she does not have another class until Wednesday. Will suggests that she go back alone. She looks puzzled. Will says that they have been spending a lot of time together and maybe they need a little time apart. Kayla does not understand and she asks if he came to the party to break up with her. Will tells her that he just thinks she needs more time to study. She tells him that this excuse is weak. He tells her that she got a D on her last exam. She asks if his aunt told him and the whole world that she got one bad grade. He reasons with her and tells her that she has a big opportunity and he does not want be part of her blowing it. She states that it is and everybody keeps telling her that and she does not need to hear it from him. She leaves the party.

Will goes to her room and finds her studying. He tells her that he knows he did not say all the right things. She asks him what he is trying to say. He wanted her to study and she studying. Now he is there talking about something else. She asks him what he wants and states that she wished everyone would leave her alone. Aunt Viv tells Kayla that she told Will to leave her alone. Kayla is stunned. She tells Aunt Viv that she is not her legal guardian and asks how she would feel if someone interfered with her life. Will rises to go but Aunt Viv tells him to stay because she wants him to hear what she has to say. Before she can speak, Kayla tells her that she does not understand. She has four older sisters that were all mamas before they were 18 and none of them finished high

school. Now everybody is waiting for Kayla. She says she is the last chance for the whole family. She tells her she has no idea what that feels like.

Aunt Viv tells her she knows what it feels like and what it feels like to clean hotel bathrooms at night just to get the high school diploma she did not get. Will did not know that Aunt Viv had dropped out of high school. She states that she is not proud of it and that her whole family was counting on her, too. She could not handle the pressure so she ran off with some guy and quit school. By the time she realized she had made a mistake, it was too late. She was left with no education and nothing qualified to do. It took her years to get back. She tells Kayla that if she wonders how she fits in so well it is because she worked hard to get there and she knows she deserves it. She tells Kayla that she does not know she deserves it. She and Will know it but unless she knows it, there is nothing more she can say. Aunt Viv leaves.

Will says that he did not know Aunt Vivian cleaned hotel rooms because she never cleaned his room. He asks Kayla if she is okay. Kayla says she is afraid. Will tells her that he is there or not there to help or not help. That she can do it. She says she has a lot of catching up because of three weeks of goofing off. She tells Will goodbye.

Strengths. Aunt Viv's encouragement of Will to leave Kayla alone so she can succeed shows a strong work orientation. Kayla's scholastic aptitude and achievement denotes strong achievement and work orientations. Will being raised by his Aunt and Uncle and the familial relationships among the family represents a strong kinship bond.

Season 2, Episode 6, "Guess Who is Coming to Marry," (NBC, October 14, 1991)

Aunt Vivian's sister, Will's aunt, is getting married. The wedding will be at the Banks home. Will's mother Viola, who raised her sisters, is already there. The rest of the family is arriving for the festivities, including cousin Bobby, Aunt Helen and Uncle Lester's son, who is an adolescent terror who lacks discipline. The cousins watch him in shifts, much to their dismay. Janice, the bride, arrives and tells the family that Frank, her fiancé, will arrive the next day.

The next day, a black man comes to the house with luggage and the family automatically believes he is Janice's fiancé and they greet him. They tell him that Janice will be down in a minute. In the meantime, a white man walks into the house and Janice comes down the steps and greets him with a kiss. The white man is Frank, her fiancé. Janice shows him to his room, leaving the family in shock. Viola does not want her to marry Frank. She decides not to attend the wedding and forces Will not to attend as well.

Later that evening, three of the sisters, minus Viola, gather in the kitchen because they cannot sleep. They discuss how the family has always endured surprises and dealt with them, including their uncle who out of the closet at the last family reunion. The sisters confront Janice, asking her why she did not tell them that Frank was white. She states that she was afraid she would not get their approval. Vivian asks if she is sure this is what she wants to do. Janice says there is not a doubt in her mind. Helen reminds her that there are plenty of black men available just as good as Frank, but in support tells her she cannot control who she falls in love with.

Viola comes into the kitchen and is invited to join them. Viola confronts Janice about not telling her Frank was white. She is upset in that she believes that Janice's marriage to Frank will complicate her life, as she will be subjected to discrimination and unfair treatment. Janice tells her she has thought of all that and that she is going through with it.

The morning of the wedding, Will tells his mother that he is going to the wedding. Viola tells him he is not going but he stands his ground. She states that she has raised everyone but now everyone knows better than she does. She believes that because Janice is not willing to do as she says that Janice does not respect her. Viola says that Janice does not care about her so now she does not care about her. Will asks her to clarify if she believes that if someone does not do as she say that they do not love her and she will no longer love them. He says that he hopes that is not the case because he loves her and he will not always make the decisions she wants him to make. He is going to the wedding. The entire family shows up to support Janice, minus Viola. Later, Viola shows up at the wedding just as the pastor arrives at the part in the ceremony where he asks for objections. Viola gives her approval.

Strengths. Adaptability of family roles is evident because Viola is clearly the mother of her sisters. It is also evident in Phil and Helen's decision to raise Will for Viola to protect him from a threat in Philadelphia. The lifestyle of Phil and Helen shows strong work and achievement orientations. The desire of Viola to want the best for her sister Janice and the sacrifice she has made for her also shows strong work and achievement orientations. The wedding with a pastor officiating indicates a strong

religious orientation. The family shows strong kinship bonds in immediate and extended family relationships.

Season 4, Episode 8, "Blood is Thicker Than Mud," (NBC, November 1, 1993)

Carlton is pledging a fraternity. Carlton is leaning toward Lambda Kappa Nu, a white fraternity. Will, impressed with Phi Beta Gamma after seeing them step, tries to get Carlton to lean that way. He asks Carlton if he would be more interested in pledging a fraternity that has members who look like him. Carlton says that he was because they all had on shirts with an alligator. Will meets a friend, Top Dog. He and Will play ball at the courts. He asks Will where he has been. Will says he cannot play on the tired court where he usually plays. Top Dog tells him that he has not been down there lately. He and his frat brothers have made many repairs to the court. Will says he did not know that he was in a fraternity. Top Dog invites Will to check them out. Will says he is not into the fraternity life. Then a pretty, young woman walks up and tells Top Dog that she will see him that night at the party. Will states that he may check them out. Top Dog tells him that partying is not all they do, They also do lots for the community like visit senior citizens and tutor kids at the juvenile hall. Carlton overhears him speaking about the community services and says that kind of stuff looks great on Princeton applications. Then he asks would he really have to go down to the juvenile hall because he hears the juveniles are real troublemakers. Top Dog thinks he is teasing and laughs it off. He introduces himself to Carlton and tries to do a cultural handshake. Carlton does not know how to do it. Top Dog invites Will and Carlton to come down to the frat house to pledge.

Aunt Viv and Hillary have just finished watching a soap opera. Ashley does not understand why they are watching it and that she will watch the baby so they can get out of the house. Aunt Viv (her mother) tells her that they watch the soaps because real life is boring sometimes. While they are talking, they hear a motorcycle outside. Vivian goes to see what is going on and finds that Phillip has purchased a motorcycle. She asks him why he bought it. He said that she knew he would buy a motorcycle someday. She tells him that it is dangerous and that they have a new baby and they need him in one piece. She begs him to let go of his mid-life crisis and be home with them.

Will and Carlton walk up and ask Uncle Phil about the bike. He snaps at them and states he bought it because he wants it. Will says that must be part of the mid-life crisis Aunt Viv told them about. He asks them how things are at school. Carlton tells his father that he is thinking about pledging Phi Beta Gamma. He tells him that it looks like he is a real college man now. Carlton thanks his father and tells them he is going to take a nap. Uncle Phil asks Will if he is going to try to pledge. Will says it is not his thing. Uncle Phil tries to encourage Will to pledge. He takes him for a ride on the bike.

Will and Carlton are pledging a fraternity. The dean of pledges, Top Dog, tells the pledges that they are wearing what they will be wearing for the next week. Carlton challenges it by stating that to wear the same thing for a week is unsanitary. Top Dog states that Pledge Banks likes to wash clothes. Carlton tells him that actually his butler washes his clothes. Top Dog asks Carlton where he lives. He says Bel-Air and that he lives across the street from the Spelling mansion, the man who made the television show *90210*. Will tells Carlton that he is going to make a fool out of himself and to be quiet.

They give the pledges mops and buckets and tell them the floors could use a good mopping. Carlton says a buff and shine. Top Dog agrees and tells the pledges that they are to thank Carlton for their new chores.

Will and Carlton are doing chores with the rest of the pledges. They are painting the door with a small paintbrush, washing the dog with a pitcher of water, chopping ice for drinks off colossal blocks of ice, squeezing lemons by hand, and eating live fish. However, they are giving Carlton the hardest tasks and working him harder than everyone else. Will brings it to Carlton's attention. One of the frat brothers tells Top Dog that he does not like what he did to Carlton. Top Dog tells him that he did not ask for his opinion.

Aunt Viv is in the kitchen when Uncle Phil tells her he is giving up the motorcycle. He tells her that with her by his side he will never grow old. He tells her that he loves her and has decided that he belongs there with her. Geoffrey comes into the kitchen and tells Phillip that the body shop called and said the bike is totaled, the insurance company called and said he is fully covered for the damages to the ice cream trucks and his bike, but he will have to pay for the box of Eskimo pies he ate. Vivian looks at him angrily and he tells her that if he told the truth she would have said that she told him so. He says that he left the bike in gear and it rolled into an ice cream truck. She tells him that she told him the bike was dangerous. He says, "See." She asks him what he wants from her. He says a kiss, because he broke his bike.

The fraternity is having a party. Carlton tells Will he thinks that it is cruel to have a party before they tell them if they are in. Will says that it is cruel but they will get to do

it next year to the new pledges. Will approaches a woman dancing and tells her how fine she is. He then walks to Top Dog and tells him the girl is fine. Top Dog tells him she is just a tip of the iceberg. Top Dog then tells Will that he is not supposed to say anything but he will not have any problem getting in, but that Carlton is not made for their fraternity. Will tells him Carlton is exactly what they need as he has made straight As all his life. Top Dog tells Will that the decision was made and the discussion is closed.

Will tells Carlton that he did not get in and is ready to go. Carlton confronts Top Dog about Will not getting in and that he is fraternity material. Top Dog says he knows. That is why Will got in but he did not. Carlton says that he did everything they asked him to from cooking to washing the dishes, to cleaning the toilets by hand. Top Dog said right, everything your butler does for you. He tells Carlton he is not allowing a sell out like him into the fraternity.

Will walks up on Top Dog to fight when Carlton tell him he will handle it. Carton asks Top Dog if he thinks he is a sell out because he lives in a big house or dresses a certain way. Or is it because he likes Barry Manilow. He informs Top Dog the being black is not who he trying to be, it is who he is. He is running the same race and jumping the same hurdles that he is, so he asks why Top Dog is tripping him up. He reminds Top Dog that he said they needed to stick together but he is not sure Top Dog knows what that means. Carlton tells him that he is the real sell out. He then leaves the party. Will follows. A member of the fraternity tells Tip Dog that he does not speak for the rest of them and they are going to have him kicked out.

Carlton and Will return home. Aunt Viv asks if she is looking at new Phi Beta brothers. Carlton states that apparently he is not much of a brother to be a brother. Uncle Phil is appalled. Will says that the pledge leader said he did not like sellouts. Uncle Phil says he worked hard to give his family a good life and now someone is telling him there is a penalty for success. He tells his son that he is sorry he had to go through it. He asks when black people are going to stop doing that to each other.

Strengths. Carlton and Will exhibit strong achievement orientation by attempting to pledge a fraternity. Carlton's commitment and dedication to the work he was asked to perform shows he has a strong work orientation. Carlton and Will take up for each other against Top Dog. This is indicative of strong kinship orientation. When Ashley gets on her mother about watching the soaps and then offers to care for her brother so their mother can get out of the house demonstrates adaptability of roles. All family members exhibit strong kinship roles by demonstrating concern (Vivian for Phillip and the bike, Will for Carlton being taking advantage of, Ashley for her mother's boredom), offering help (Ashley for her mother), and giving advice (Uncle Phil to Will, Will to Carlton, Vivian to Phillip).

Table 11. Summary of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* Strengths

<i>The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S1E21	x	x	x	x	x
S2E6	x	x		x	
S4E8	x	x	x	x	

Cosby—1997

This series was based on the British sitcom *One Foot in the Grave*. The lead is Hilton Lucas, a former airline employee forced into retirement.¹⁰⁰³ He constantly complains about all the things he finds wrong with the world and his neighborhood. His wife, Ruth, works part time in a flower shop with her best friend, Pauline, in their Queen neighborhood. The Lucases have a grown daughter, Erica, who is an attorney at a Manhattan law firm. She is not sure she likes being an attorney, which bothers her father. She eventually becomes a teacher. Their neighbor, Griffin, was Erica's high school classmate and is a constant visitor in the Lucas home.¹⁰⁰⁴

Season 1, Episode 14, "Guess Whose President is Coming to Dinner," (CBS, January 6, 1997)

The Lucases discover that the president is coming to their neighborhood and they have been selected to host dinner for him. Hilton convinces Ruth to do it. She agrees. Mr. Dean, the head of the Secret Service, asked them to keep it a secret and just invite family. However, Hilton tells the whole neighborhood and they all congregate outside his home, creating chaos. Griffin comes by to remind them that he is family. Hilton says that this event is just for real family members. Erica shows up and tells her parents that she is in charge. When the president comes, she will tell him they need more women on

¹⁰⁰³ Gregory Adamo, *African Americans in Television: Behind the Scenes*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2010, 163.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Tim Brooks, Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present*, 9th edition, New York, Ballantine Books, 2007, 287.

the Supreme Court and that they need more women in the cabinet. Griffin says that he needs more women in his bedroom.

Pauline comes by the next day to help Ruth clean and cook. After cleaning, they convene in the kitchen to finish cooking. At first, things are going well until Pauline mistakenly puts the shrimp in the white chocolate and puts the strawberries in the Newberg sauce. Ruth, irritated, asks Pauline if she is mad because she was not invited. Pauline asks if she was. Ruth states no, and Pauline confirms that, yes, she is mad. Pauline states that she does not understand it in that she has known Ruth for 15 years and has been there for her and her family. Pauline believes that she is like family, that they started a business together. Ruth asks Pauline not argue with her today because she has a lot to do. Pauline says OK and tells Ruth that she is being stingy. She states that no one would know that they were not related unless they did a DNA test (note – Pauline is white). Ruth reiterates that that it is just for family and it is out of her hands. Ruth ruins the meal by putting chocolate on the Lobster Newburg and storms out.

Later that day Secret Service agents arrive to do a last check of the house. Ruth is still trying to dress and the house is buzzing. Just as she attempts to go upstairs to change, Griffin shows up. He is dressed in his suit and pushes his way in. Hilton tells him that he cannot stay. Griffin begs, says he is family, and he wants to meet the president. He slides in, telling Hilton to look at what he brought the president—a boon box that plays *Hail to the Chief*. Griffin plays the song and everyone comes to the front of the house thinking the president has arrived. Hilton tells them it is not the president. Ruth asks him to stop playing. At that moment, Pauline comes into the house with a tray

of food. She apologizes to Ruth for ruining her dinner and tells her she made Jell-O, using the family mold and different colors of Jell-O. Just before she leaves, Ruth apologizes to Pauline and tells her she is her dearest friend and that they are family. She invites Pauline to stay, who is already dressed for the occasion under her coat. Ruth tries again to go back upstairs to dress.

The doorbell rings again and Griffin plays *Hail to the Chief*. Everyone runs to the front of the house. It is Singh, who is also upset that he was not invited to dinner. He sees the Jell-O and states he loves Jell-O. Hilton allows him to stay. The doorbell rings again and Griffin plays *Hail to the Chief*. Everyone runs to the front of the house. This time it is Mayor Giuliani. Hilton introduces himself and tries to introduce his wife, who tells the mayor she is Ruth's twin sister because she is standing there in her bathrobe. She runs off to get dressed. Hilton asks the mayor why he is there. The mayor states that the president never comes to his house and he to talk to him. Hilton tells him it is okay for him to stay and that he will tell the president that he is Cousin Mel from the Bronx. The mayor agrees. Hilton tells him next time vote Democrat. Pauline asks the mayor if he would care for a chocolate shrimp. He confirms she said chocolate shrimp. She says yes. He then asks her if she is a registered voter. She states yes. He states he would love one. They walk to the kitchen.

The doorbell rings again and Griffin plays *Hail to the Chief*. Everyone runs to the door. This time it is Mr. Dean. He asks Hilton for a quick chat. He tells Hilton that the president wants a nice quiet evening just relaxing, one average guy talking to another. Hilton tells him that is good because he has a list of things he wants to discuss with him.

He wants to ask about social security, Medicare...Just as he is about to ask another question, a Secret Service agent walks into the room and tells Mr. Dean that the president is on the phone wishing to speak to him. The president tells him that the limousine broke an axle going over a pothole on the Grand Central Parkway. Everybody turns to look at the mayor. He tells them not to look at him. He is Cousin Mel from the Bronx. He tells Mr. Dean that he will be so delayed that he will not be able to make it there before his meeting at the United Nations. He asks to speak to Hilton. When Hilton says, hello, Mr. President, Griffin plays *Hail to the Chief*. Hilton gives him a look and he stops. He tells him that his wife spent an awful lot of time cleaning the house. He tells the president that he gave up two days in the Poconos. The President asks to speak to his wife. The President tells her that he wants them to come visit him at Camp David. She thanks him and hangs up. Hilton then says that it seems to be the way the public officials handle things. Anytime someone has a chance to see them face-to-face and have some tough questions for them, they just hold you up. Then he realizes that the mayor is still there. Everyone looks to him and he says he will stay. He asks if there is more chocolate shrimp. Pauline tells him plenty. He takes a seat.

Strengths. Ruth and Hilton allow their fictive kin to stay to meet the president. Pauline helps Ruth clean and cook even though she is not invited to stay. She brings food to make up for ruining the meal and Ruth declares that she is sorry and that they are family. All of these denote strong kinship bonds. Erica's questions and Hilton's questions they plan to ask suggest strong achievement orientation. When Erica arrives at the house to take over the planning, the family is demonstrating adaptability of roles.

Season 1, Episode 20, "That Darn Cat," (CBS, March 3, 1997)

Erica is moving home until her apartment is ready. Hilton chastises her for not planning better so that she would be able to move into the apartment instead of coming there. He asks how much she is paying for the apartment in Manhattan. She says \$2,000. He asks how many bedrooms she is getting for that price and she says none. He tells her that she can get an 8-bedroom apartment and car in Hoboken for that. Then Erica brings in a cat. Hilton reminds her that he is allergic to cats. Erica states that there was nowhere else to leave it. Hilton says that he and his wife will sleep downstairs and she has to keep the cat upstairs. However, Ruth says she is sleeping upstairs because she is not allergic to cats. She then tells Hilton to take care of the bags. He puts them on the stoop but Ruth tells him to bring them in.

Erica and her friend, Stephanie, are in her bedroom. Her friend has just taken a pregnancy test and has found out that she is pregnant. She is excited about it and cannot wait to tell her husband. Griffin comes in the room to get Erica's keys so he can install her television set at her new apartment. He mentions that the big screen is expensive—\$5,000. Her friend says. "Wow, an apartment for \$2,000 and a \$5,000 television is a lot." Erica asks Griffin not to say anything around her father because he is having a problem with her spending. She just wants to spend a little on herself. They both agree.

Hilton goes to the video store to pick up some movies. He asks the clerk for some classic moves, and the clerk does not know what he talking about. While he is there, another customer asks the clerk about *Rio Bravo* and *Eldorado*. The Clerk does not know, but Hilton does. The clerk is impressed and offers Hilton a job. He accepts.

Later Griffin comes back to drop off some brochures for Erica. Hilton is lying on the couch. Hilton enquires about the envelope. Griffin gets nervous, rambles, and decides to take the brochures with him instead of leaving them because he does not trust Hilton will not look inside. Then the cat jumps up on the couch and he begins to sneeze.

The next day, Hilton is taking a shower and tells Ruth to make sure that when he comes out the cat is nowhere around. As she goes toward Erica's room, she notices the door is open and the cat is on the loose. Ruth notices her room has trash on the floor so she picks it up, puts in the trashcan, and then brings the trash downstairs.

While Ruth is still looking for the cat, the doorbell rings. Their neighbor, Pauline, comes in and asks Ruth what she is doing. She states that she is looking for the cat and has to dump Erica's trash. She notices there is a pregnancy test in the trash. She begins to take a look noting that she has been saying lately that she is tired. Then she notices all the junk food in the trash. Pauline tells her that it is none of her business. Ruth says that is in her house and it is her daughter, so it is her business. Pauline tells Ruth that it is Erica's business. Ruth thanks Pauline for helping her keep her integrity. Pauline then says but it not her house, her trash, or her daughter. There is no ethical restriction keeping her from taking the test. Pauline finds the test and tells Ruth that Erica is pregnant. Ruth is upset that Erica did not tell her. Ruth tells Pauline that Erica is not seeing anyone. However, Pauline says she thinks Erica is. Ruth says she cannot tell Hilton because she is not supposed to know. She and Pauline rush out of the house and Ruth says that she does not believe this is happening to her. At the same time, Hilton comes in. He asks her what is wrong. She tells him she is late for work.

In the kitchen, the cat knocks over the trashcan. The pregnancy test falls out. Hilton picks it up. Hilton thinks that Ruth is pregnant, remembering that he heard her say that she cannot believe this is happening to her. He believes Ruth is upset that she is pregnant. Hilton at first thinks, why him. Then he thinks proudly, why not him.

Later that day Hilton goes to the video store. The clerk tells him that he watched some of the movies he suggested and Hilton asked him what he thought about the ones he watched. The clerk states that *Tale of Two Cities* was too long and that at the end they should have just blown the cities up. Then Griffin comes in and asks Hilton to hook him up with some free videos. Hilton asks Griffin what he would think if he told him that Ruth was pregnant. Griffin states that he would say that she had a younger man in her life. Hilton asks what he would say if he told him that Mrs. Lucas was pregnant. Griffin laughs and says that he would not believe it. Hilton says, why, because of her age? Griffin says no. He believes Mrs. Lucas could be pregnant, but he would be surprised that Hilton could get her pregnant. He did not realize at his age that metaphorically his boys could still swim.

Hilton goes home and finds the cat sitting on the sofa. The cat will not move. Ruth comes in and tells the cat to go upstairs. He does and closes the door when he gets in the room. Hilton takes Ruth's bags into the kitchen. Ruth tells Hilton that when Erica comes home they need to have a conversation. Hilton agrees and Ruth asks him if he knows. He says that, of course, he knows and he thinks it is wonderful. He saw the box in the trash. Ruth is stunned that he so happy and is actually glowing. He says he is proud. She asks how he could be happy when they do not even know who the father is.

Hilton laughs, thinking that she is joking. Ruth says it could be Griffin because he has been hanging around the house for years.

Hilton laughs as Griffin comes into the room. Hilton greets him and Griffin states he was just dropping something off. He then congratulates Ruth on the baby. Ruth tells him that they cannot talk right then and asks him to leave. Ruth says that it is clear that Griffin is the father of Erica's baby. Hilton asks if Erica is pregnant, too. Ruth asks him who else did he think was pregnant? He answers by stating that his boys can still swim. He then asks when did Erica get married and why did not she tell Ruth. Ruth responds that Erica knows that Ruth tells Hilton everything and she knows how he would react.

Griffin comes back into the room to ask them to let Erica know that he left her key to her apartment on her desk. Hilton asks Griffin if he has something he wants to tell them. Griffin states that he promised Erica that he would not say anything. Ruth states that it was Erica's place to tell them. Griffin states that Erica makes enough money now and can afford it. Ruth tells Griffin that surely he will help. Griffin states that his work is done. In fact, he made her pay him. Hilton is perplexed and asks for clarification about Erica paying him. Griffin asks why that is hard to believe. He provided a services and he should be paid. Hilton begins taking his jewelry off in preparation to beat Griffin up and asks Ruth if she wants to watch. Ruth says yes. Griffin runs out the room.

Pauline comes by to talk with Ruth and Hilton. She tries to make them feel better by speaking about how different the times are then earlier in their lives. People are very strong and stable, they will handle it, and she will be of any support they need. When she sees Erica coming up the walk, Pauline runs away. Hilton thanks her for her help. Erica

comes in the house and Ruth asks her if she has something she wants to tell them. She asks if they know and they say yes. She tells them that if it will make them feel any better, Griffin was a pro and was worth every penny. Hilton asks Ruth to make it go away. Ruth asks Erica why she did not tell her. Erica says she was waiting for the right time and inquires how she found out. Ruth said the pregnancy test was in the garbage.

Erica is shocked that they think the test was hers. She tells them that the test belonged to Stephanie. Ruth then asks about all the secrecy between her and Griffin. Erica tells her that she knows she tells her father everything and she knows how he will react. Her mother tells her that she understands. Erica tells her that Griffin installed an entertainment system in her new apartment. Hilton asks what is so difficult about that. He could not understand what all the trouble was. Erica then divulges that the system cost \$5000. He states that that is where the trouble is. He gets angry that she spent \$5,000 on an entertainment system and is spending \$2,000 for an apartment.

Ruth tells Erica that she understands how Hilton will react. Ruth tells Hilton that Erica knows when she shares things with Ruth she will not overreact. Erica asks Ruth how she found out about the pregnancy test that was in a box in the trash in her room. Hilton takes off. Ruth tries to explain that it fell on the floor. Ruth says that really Pauline got it, opened it, and showed it to her. Pauline, who they thought had left, emerges from the kitchen, stating that she did not tell Ruth the results of the test. She apologizes for still being in the house, saying that she got lost going out the back way. Ruth tries to explain that she was in labor with her for 14 hours and the delivery was

difficult, reminding her that even though she is little she had a big head. She tells her that through it all she has loved her with all her heart and that she would do it again.

Strengths. There is a strong kinship bond between Hilton, Erica, and Ruth. There is a fictive kinship bond between the Lucases and Griffin. He is allowed to come in and out of the house as he wants and the family shares personal information with him as though he were a member of the family. Pauline and Ruth have a sort of fictive relationship as well. The family is not pleased that she is still in the house and listening to the conversation between Ruth, Erica, and Hilton. The parents' concern that Erica may have been pregnant and not married indicates a desire for her to be successful and represents a strong achievement orientation.

Season 1, Episode 23, "My Dinner with Methuselah," (CBS, May 5, 1997)

Pauline has just returned from a date and stops by the Lucas home to give Ruth an update. The date was horrible. Pauline states that she wanted the 8-year-old Cabernet and he wanted the 26-year-old aerobics instructor. Ruth asks if he told her he met someone. Pauline says no, he met her at the table next to them. He used her pen to get the woman's number. Hilton enters the room and asks Ruth if there is any cheesecake left. Pauline attacks Hilton, stating that that all men want nice young firm cheesecake and eat it, too. Hilton says yes with a big glass of milk. Pauline says why buy the cow when you can get the milk free. Hilton asks what his problem is with dairy products. She tells him he is such a male. Ruth tells him that she is very upset. Pauline looks at her watch and notes the time, saying, "Who would believe that you could pack that much fun and humiliation into just one hour?" She leaves the house.

Pauline is at the flower shop pulling petals off a flower playing the he loves me, he loves me not game. Ruth walks in and tells her she loves her because she has just set her up with a mystery man for a date. Pauline declines, stating she is not a charity case and can find her own man. Ruth pulls a petal and says she will have to find someone else for this handsome, intelligent, and sensitive man. Pauline changes her mind and decides to give it a try. Ruth asks if she minds a slight age difference. Pauline states that age is just a number imposed on us by mere mortals. Ruth tells her to come to their house at seven the next night.

The night of the dinner, Mr. Otto Tibble, an old man, stops by the Lucas house to borrow a video tape. Watching old movies is how Mr. Tibble likes to spend his evenings. Hilton, who is waiting downstairs for Ruth to get ready, shouts upstairs to let Ruth know he is going to the video store to retrieve a tape to give to Mr. Tibble before they leave for dinner. Mr. Tibble is told to wait and Hilton leaves. While he is waiting, Pauline comes in and greets him. She tells him that she is there to meet someone and that he must be a friend of Ruth's. He says yes, she is a lovely lady, and that if it were not for Ruth he would have nothing to do that night. Pauline pauses and states she was so wrong that age is more than a number. Sometimes it is several numbers. He introduces himself as Otto Tibble. He asks her who she is and she states she is shocked and confused. She introduces herself to him telling him her name is Pauline. He states that she is the first Pauline he is ever met and if he ever met another Pauline, he would like for her to look just like her. Pauline tells him it is nice to meet him and that she has heard so much about him but somehow not nearly enough. She asks him if he would mind if she took a

very deep breath at that time. She starts to breathe deeply and sigh near the top of her vocal range. She asks if Ruth is in the kitchen. He tells her no that he was asked to wait. Pauline tells him that she supposes them not witnessing their first meeting was the best idea. Then she laughs. She asks Otto if they should be off to Mario's for dinner. Otto says, sure they can eat first.

At the restaurant, Otto is telling Pauline a joke. He starts out talking about a duck on a deserted island, and ends it with a priest on a deserted island. In the background, the tango is being played. Otto asks if Pauline wants to trip the light fantastic (dance). She asks if he will stop telling jokes if she does. He says for now as he has run out of ducks. They dance the tango. He gets really close and low. She says that he should leave room for the Holy Ghost. He says he is an atheist. She dances him to back to his seat telling him to let the blood flow back to his brain while she goes to powder her nose.

Ruth and Hilton walk into the restaurant and Ruth notices Mr. Tibble. They go to the table to greet him just a Pauline is walking up. She asks Ruth if this is like stopping on the highway to view an accident after it has happened. She asks how Ruth would be interested in this man. Several characters in the bible are based on this man. Frankincense and Myrrh is his cologne. Ruth asks Pauline if she thinks Mr. Tibble is her date. Before she can answer, a man runs into the restaurant. Ruth tells Pauline that he is her date. He apologizes for being late and introduces himself as Frank. Mr. Tibble rises up to tell Frank that Pauline is his date and he has dibs on Ruth. Hilton tells Mr. Tibble that Ruth is his wife and to sit down. Mr. Tibble states that it is too bad this is not the 60s because they could all move in together.

Richard approaches Pauline and says they are supposed to be doing dinner together. Pauline does not think she can do anything of that nature just now. She is entering into what historians would call her cat phase. She has been a dating disaster magnet. As a young woman with long legs walks by, Pauline says “like that.” Frank says “like what?” She asks if he was just staring at the girl that just walked by. He asks her what girl. He did not see anybody as he was talking to her. Pauline lets Ruth know that Richard and she are about to eat. Hilton states he will join them. She tells him that they will not. She and Richard go to their own table.

Strengths. Ruth considers Pauline family and is concerned about her happiness and desire to be in a relationship. This suggests a strong family bond within fictive kin relationships. Pauline’s mention of the Holy Ghost while she and Mr. Tibble danced shows strong religious orientation—even more so when she felt Mr. Tibble get excited and danced him back to his seat.

Table 12. Summary of *Cosby* Strengths

<i>Cosby</i>	Strong kinship bonds	Strong working orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
S1E14	x			x	
S1E20	x		x	x	
S1E23	x				x

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether African-American family television shows produced between 1980 and 2000 accurately depicted the strengths of the black family. To accomplish this, the researcher analyzed the most popular shows that depicted African-American family storylines and characters. Black family television shows can serve two purposes: to entertain and to influence viewers positively. Black family-oriented comedies between 1980 and 2000 entertained but they may also have had cultural significance beyond being a black show. The content of shows that dominated during the black television show heyday deserved an analysis. Programs depicting representations of black family life were examined to determine what content could be considered significant to the black viewer and if it was culturally realistic.

Results

The analysis of the 30 episodes of ten Top 30 black family televisions shows confirmed that each family was a true representation of black families in terms of familial relation. The relationship of the family members to the main character was determined (See Tables 13, 14, and 15). Half of the shows, *The Jeffersons*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Webster*, *227*, and *Amen* included all at least three of the five examples of blood, marriage, adoption, informal adoption, or appropriation/fictive familial

relationships. Four of the remaining shows, *The Cosby Show*, *Family Matters*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Cosby* included at least two examples of blood, marriage, or appropriation/fictive familial relationships. The remaining show, *A Different World*, depicted appropriation/fictive familial relationships among the students, faculty, and staff of a fictional university.

Ten Top 30 black family shows aired for more than one season on major network television between 1980 and 2000. Three episodes of each show were assessed to determine the strengths of black families. Table 16 contains a summary of the strengths found in each episode of each show. Figure 1 contains a description of the episodes depicting each of the five strengths. Two of the strengths were found in more than 80% of the shows. Strong kinship bonds were found in 28 (93%) episodes and 25 (83%) episodes depicted strong achievement orientation. Strong work orientation was found in 21 (73%) of the episodes. A strong religious orientation was depicted in 13 (43%) of the episodes selected for review Twelve (40%) episodes found instances of adaptability of family roles.

Table 13. Characters' Relationship to Main Character: Shows from 1980 to 1985

Television show	Character/Relationship to main character (*)	Race	Blood	Marriage	Formal adopt	Informal adopt	Appropriation/ fictive
The Jeffersons	George Jefferson*	Black					
	Louise Jefferson	Black	x				
	Florence Johnston	Black					x
	Lionel Jefferson	Black	x				
	Jenny Willis Jefferson	Black		x			
	Helen Willis	Black		x			
	Tom Willis	White		x			
	Harry Bentley	White					x
Different Strokes	Mr. Drummond*	White					
	Willis Jackson	Black			x		
	Arnold Jackson	Black			x		
	Kimberly Drummond	White	x				
	Edna Garrett	White					x
	Adelaide Brubaker	White					x
	Pearl Gallagher	White					x
Webster	Webster Long*	Black					
	George Papadapolis	White			x		
	Katherine (Ma'am) Papadapolis	White			x		
	Uncle Phillip Long	Black	x				
	Bill Parker	White					x
	Cassie Parker	White					x
	Jerry Silver	White					x
The Cosby Show	Heathcliff Huxtable*	Black					
	Claire Huxtable	Black		x			
	Sondra Huxtable Tibideaux	Black	x				
	Denise Huxtable	Black	x				
	Theodore Huxtable	Black	x				
	Vanessa Huxtable	Black	x				
	Rudy Huxtable	Black	x				
	Russell Huxtable	Black	x				
	Anna Huxtable	Black	x				
	Martin Kendall	Black		x			
	Elvin Tibideaux	Black		x			
	Olivia Kendall	Black		x			
Pam Tucker	Black	x					

Table 14. Characters' Relationship to Main Character: Shows from 1985 to 1987

Television show	Character/Relationship to main character (*)	Race	Blood	Marriage	Formal adopt	Informal adopt	Appropriation/ fictive
227	Mary Jenkins*	Black					
	Lester Jenkins	Black		x			
	Brenda Jenkins	Black	x				
	Sondra Clark	Black					x
	Rose Holloway	Black					x
	Pearl Shay	Black					x
	Calvin Dobbs	Black					x
	Alexandria DeWitt	Black				x	
	Tiffany Holloway	Black					
Amen	Deacon Ernest Frye*	Black					
	Thelma Frye	Black	x				
	Rev. Reuben	Black		x			
	Cassietta Hetebrink	Black					x
	Amelia Hetebrink	Black					x
	Rolly Forbes	Black					x
A Different World	Denise Huxtable*	Black					
	Whitley Gilbert	Black					x
	Dwayne Wayne	Black					x
	Ron Johnson	Black					x
	Jaleesa Vinson	Black					x
	Kimberly Reese	Black					x
	Freddie Brooks	Black					x
	Vernon Gaines	Black					x
	Lettie Bostic	Black					x
	Colonel Brad Taylor	Black					x
Walter Oaks	Black					x	
Terrance Taylor	Black						

Table 15. Characters' Relationship to Main Character: Shows from 1990 to 1998

Television show	Character/Relationship to main character (*)	Race	Blood	Marriage	Formal adopt	Informal adopt	Appropriation/ fictive
Family Matters	Carl Winslow*	Black					
	Harriet Winslow	Black		x			
	Laura Winslow	Black	x				
	Eddie Winslow	Black	x				
	Judy Winslow	Black	x				
	Estelle Winslow	Black	x				
	Rachel Crawford	Black		x			
	Richie Crawford	Black		x			
	Steven Urkel	Black					x
Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	Will Smith*	Black					
	Vivian Banks	Black	x				
	Phillip Banks	Black		x			
	Carlton Banks	Black	x				
	Hillary Banks	Black	x				
	Ashley Banks	Black	x				
	Geoffery Butler	Black					x
	Jazz	Black					x
Cosby	Hilton Lucas*	Black					
	Ruth Lucas	Black		x			
	Erica Lucas	Black	x				
	Griffin Vessey	Black					x
	Pauline Fox	White					x

Table 16. Summary of Strengths of Black Families Depicted in Selected Episodes of Top 10 Black Family Television Shows From 1980 to 2000

Year/Show	Seasons in Top 30	Strong kinship bonds	Strong work orientation	Adaptability of family roles	Strong achievement orientation	Strong religious orientation
1980— <i>The Jeffersons</i>	5					
S8E23			x		x	x
S9E4		x	x			x
S9E27		x				
1981— <i>Diff'rent Strokes</i>	2					
S2E17		x	x	x	x	
S3E9		x	x	x	x	
S3E20		x	x		x	
1982— <i>Webster</i>	2					
S1E8		x		x		x
S2E10		x	x		x	
S2E20		x	x		x	
1984— <i>The Cosby Show</i>	7					
S6E19		x		x		
S6E26			x		x	x
S7E10		x		x	x	
1985— <i>227</i>	3					
S1E6		x			x	
S1E13		x			x	x
S3E11		x	x	x	x	
1986— <i>Amen</i>	3					
S1E6		x	x		x	x
S2E14		x	x		x	x
S3E6		x	x	x	x	x
1987— <i>A Different World</i>	4					
S3E16		x	x		x	
S3E19		x	x	x	x	x
S4E14		x	x		x	x
1990— <i>Family Matters</i>	3					
S2E16		x	x		x	x
S3E12		x	x	x	x	
S5E5		x	x		x	
1991— <i>Fresh Prince of Bel-Air</i>	3					
S1E21		x	x	x	x	x
S2E6		x	x		x	
S4E8		x	x	x	x	
1997— <i>Cosby</i>	2					
S1E14		x			x	
S1E20		x		x	x	
S1E23		x				x
Total		28	21	12	25	13

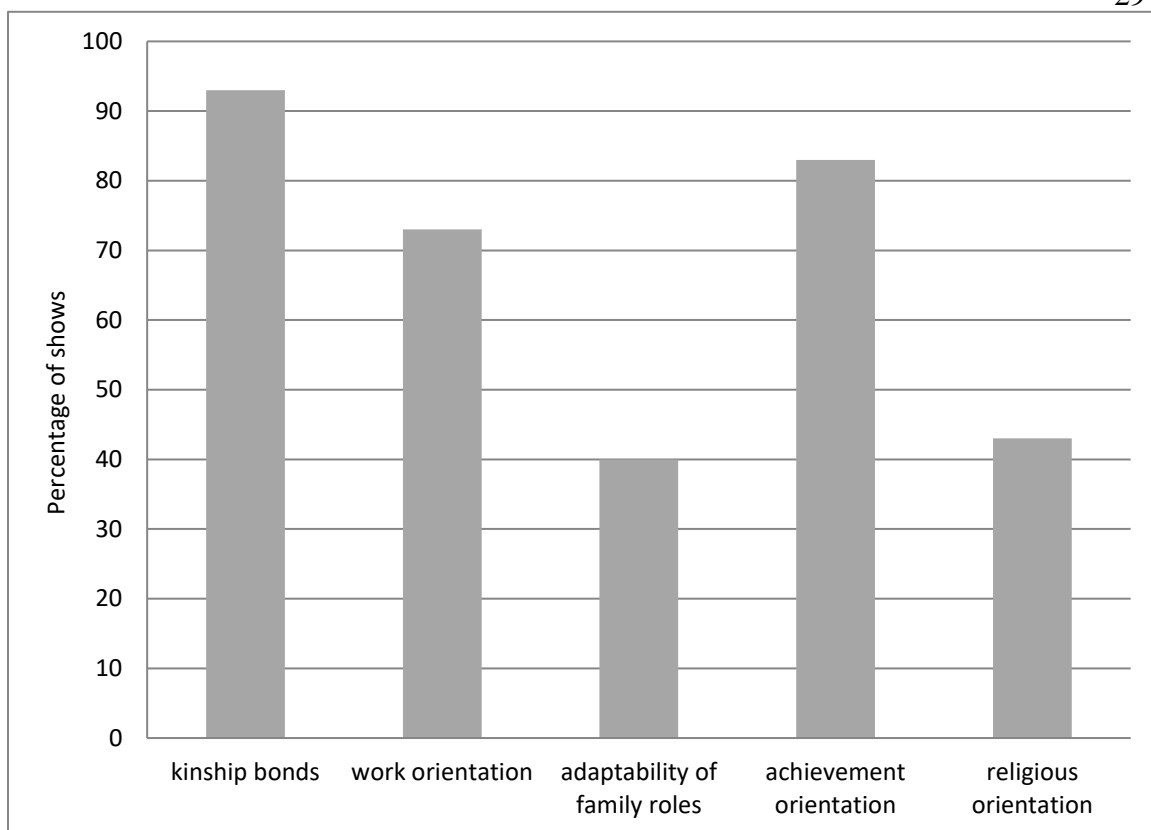


Figure 1. Strengths of black families depicted in selected episodes of Top 10 black family television shows from 1980 to 2000.

Table 17 contains the number of strengths demonstrated in each show. Three shows had episodes that had all five strengths of black families. Seven shows had episodes that depicted four of the strengths. Nine of the shows had episodes depicting three of the strengths. Two of the shows had episodes that depicted two of the strengths. One show had an episode that depicted one of the strength of black families.

Table 17. Number of Black Family Strengths Depicted in Each Episode

Show	Number of strengths depicted in each episode				
	5	4	3	2	1
The Jeffersons			S8E23 S9E4		S9E27
Diff'rent Strokes		S2E17 S3E19	S3E20		
Webster			S18E SE810 S2E20		
The Cosby Show		S6E19	S6E26 S7E10		
227		S3E11	S1E13	S1E6	
Amen	S3E6	S1E6 S2E14			
A Different World	S3E19	S4E14	S3E16		
Family Matters		S2E16 S3E12	S5E5		
The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	S1E21	S4E8	S2E6		
Cosby			S1E20	S1E14 S1E23	

Conclusion

Television is more than just a box with a picture in it. A set of behaviors and practices are associated with its use.¹⁰⁰⁵ How and where it is used affects how its viewers think and understand its role in culture.¹⁰⁰⁶ Constant negative depictions of black people

¹⁰⁰⁵ Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Not be Revolutionized* (New York University Press, New York, 2014), 29.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Not be Revolutionized* (New York University Press, New York, 2014), 30.

in popular media equates to negative perceptions of black people by others. This in turn leads to poor treatment of black people at work, school, home, and in public.¹⁰⁰⁷ This supports a premise of James Baldwin's, who in his 1961 interview for *Esquire Magazine* stated that, "All roles are dangerous. The world tends to trap you in the role you play and it is always extremely hard to maintain a watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is."¹⁰⁰⁸

Television plays a central role in the contestation, articulation, and construction of racial identity in America.¹⁰⁰⁹ In the late 1950s, the sitcoms *Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Leave it to Beaver* defined national and familial morals. Chinese, Mexican, Native Americans, and black people were not regularly depicted, meaning that they were not historically included in the nation's past or in the present.¹⁰¹⁰ These shows also defined whiteness and white cultural practices as the norm.¹⁰¹¹ Whiteness is the norm for American television, which places racial minorities in the margins.¹⁰¹²

Black images have shifted throughout the years, predicated by social upheavals and developing industries. What has been portrayed has culturally defined blacks for those who have no knowledge of their culture.¹⁰¹³ Black couples appeared in *Amos and Andy* in the 1950s. *Julia* headed a single-family household in the 1960s. However, a

¹⁰⁰⁷ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, 236.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xxv.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Sarah Nilsen, Sarah Turner, *The Colorblind Screen: Television I Post Racial America*, New York University Press, New York, 2014, 4.

¹⁰¹⁰ Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, 315.

¹⁰¹¹ Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, 315.

¹⁰¹² Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, 316.

¹⁰¹³ Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, 317.

nuclear black family was not seen on television until *Archie Bunker* in 1971. The Jeffersons—George, Louise, and Lionel—was the black family on that show. Another television show about a complete black family, with a mother, father, and children, was depicted on *Good Times*, also in the early 1970s.¹⁰¹⁴ Other black family shows followed—one influencing the next. However, black family shows were not as abundant as those portraying white families.

Advertisers and television executives did not want to upset white audiences by portraying black lives on television. The notion that white audiences would be roused by observing lives of black people in roles that were traditionally white is seated in preconceived racial biases white people have about black people.¹⁰¹⁵ According to the documentary *Color Adjustment*, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement black characterization improved with shows like *Julia*. However, two black Americas existed. One was on television news where racial issues were confronted head on. The other was the black family on prime time television that seemed not to address the issues of struggle and segregation, and whereby black and whites worked together.¹⁰¹⁶ *Julia* faced harsh criticism from black audiences who stated that the show was an attempt to sugarcoat the harsh realities of black life following the Civil Rights Movement by suggesting to white viewers that the race problem in America had been solved.¹⁰¹⁷ It had not been solved.

¹⁰¹⁴ Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, 316,317,321, 322.

¹⁰¹⁵ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xi.

¹⁰¹⁶ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xii.

¹⁰¹⁷ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xii.

The other side of the spectrum of shows that seemly did address the hardships of African-American life was *Good Times*. *Good Times* was the first prime-time television show depicting a poor, intact father-headed black family.¹⁰¹⁸ Though it depicted the financial and social hardships that many black families faced at that time, it too was criticized by black audiences because a character, JJ, was displayed as a buffoon, and that it glorified the ghetto as an enjoyable place in which to grow up.¹⁰¹⁹

The late 1970s ushered in *The Jeffersons*, an affluent black family with a maid. However, some audiences complained that the maid, Florence, was just another mammy.¹⁰²⁰ However, Florence was more of a Sapphire than she was a mammy in the way she quipped and handled the criticism of her boss, George Jefferson.¹⁰²¹ More importantly, Florence was a maid for a black family that embraced her as a part of their family. She was a fictive kin member of their household, displaying the flexibility of the family and the roles of its members. This was not a new phenomenon, certainly not in black families, but also not on black television shows. Black television families in earlier shows had fictive members of their families such as *Good Times*'s Wilona Woods, who Florida felt was more of a sister than a friend,¹⁰²² and *Sanford and Son*'s Grady Wilson, Lamont's godfather, who Fred trusted to take care of his son while he was away.¹⁰²³

¹⁰¹⁸ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xiv.

¹⁰¹⁹ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xiv.

¹⁰²⁰ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xiii.

¹⁰²¹ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xiv

¹⁰²² Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 97-98.

¹⁰²³ Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, 62.

Other aspects of *The Jeffersons* would continue to appear in black television families.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the black family on television, like the Jeffersons, *moved on up* the socioeconomic ladder.

In 1980, scholars and media professionals from around the nation met to determine the potential impact of television images of black families. These individuals wanted to know where the ideas about black families came from.¹⁰²⁴ That and the roles of social scientists and other professionals and advocates affecting television programming were discussed. *The Black Families and the Medium of Television*, sponsored by the Bush Programs in Child Development and Social Policy, provided a platform for the presentation of a variety of perspectives on the black family and its portrayal on television.¹⁰²⁵ The keynote speaker, James Comer, stated that television is particularly powerful in perpetuating the myth of the black American in a comedic, degrading, and distorted manner. The problem was the lack of balance in television's presentation of blacks.¹⁰²⁶ He felt there was too much failure and criminal activity and not enough success and responsible behavior. Thus, the rise in positive black representation in the 1980s attempted to balance black presentation on television.

Black television programming from 1980 to 2000 increased in black representation, and did indeed challenge the notion of what had been assumed as

¹⁰²⁴ Deborah Cherniss and Anthony Jackson, "Introduction," in *Black Families and the Medium of Television*, ed. Anthony Jackson (Ann Arbor, MI: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy, 1982), 11-12.

¹⁰²⁵ Deborah Cherniss and Anthony Jackson, "Introduction," in *Black Families and the Medium of Television*, ed. Anthony Jackson (Ann Arbor, MI: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy, 1982), 12.

¹⁰²⁶ Deborah Cherniss and Anthony Jackson, "Introduction," in *Black Families and the Medium of Television*, ed. Anthony Jackson (Ann Arbor, MI: Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy, 1982), 12.

blackness for mainstream audiences.¹⁰²⁷ This new view of black life was said to have blurred the established notions of race.¹⁰²⁸ Although there are some who believed that black family shows on major network television during this time were not authentically black, the strengths of the black family were portrayed, as was supported by the results of the current study. Every show reviewed portrayed characters who could have easily been noted as strong influential familial role models to a wide range of viewers.

Though the current study was not about the effect these shows had on their audiences, my own experience with some of the shows assessed can attest to their influence. My family and I enjoyed our family time surrounding a television set on any given evening. It was a precious past time I was blessed to have had with my grandparents and my parents. As a preteen and teenager growing up in Atlanta, we routinely watched shows such as *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, *What's Happening*, *Differn't Strokes*, *The Jeffersons*, *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Family Matters*, *227*, and *Amen*. I was intrigued, entertained, and willing to be influenced by the characters I recognized. The characters had lives and experiences that mirrored mine and those of my family members and neighbors. What I did not learn in socialization skills from my close family members, I learned from watching these, and other, popular television programs.

I could always depend on characters like Louise and George, Claire and Cliff, and Aunt Viv and Uncle Phil to show me what a good marriage among black couples looked like. I could relate more to the good examples already around me, which I had not paid

¹⁰²⁷ Zook, *Color by Fox*, 2.

¹⁰²⁸ Zook, *Color by Fox*, 2.

much attention to until prompted to do so by watching those couples on television. I learned how to choose a good mate, and how to fight with a partner and still operate successfully within a romantic love relationship. From these black shows, I learned more about faith, commitment, perseverance, community, and family loyalty.

Some of these shows reinforced my desire to go to college. By watching *A Different World*, I saw what college life looked like, and, as such, my desire to go to college grew deeper. The show worked better in encouraging me to go to college than my parents and grandparents telling me that I had to go because they said so. I also learned what happened when you make the wrong decisions, different ways to solve social problems, how to act around friends and professors, and what dates were about.

A historical analysis of black family television shows that appeared on major network television between 1980 and 2000 was conducted to determine if the selected episodes depicted realistic portrayals of African-American families. The shows' black cultural authenticity was determined by measuring the strengths of the black families portrayed, as defined by Robert Hill. The period selected, between 1980 and 2000, saw an increase in the number of television sitcoms in which the storyline centered on the experiences of black families. Between 1980 and 2000, 10 shows aired on major networks television stations for more than one season. One, *The Jeffersons*, is the longest running African-American cast television show.¹⁰²⁹ Another, *The Cosby Show*, is the highest rated and most watched show in television history.¹⁰³⁰ This suggests that black television shows offered something more than entertainment. Clearly, the most

¹⁰²⁹ Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, Jefferson; McFarland and Company, 145.

¹⁰³⁰ Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear*, Jefferson; McFarland and Company, 145.

significant offering these shows had, and possibly something that all its audiences desired, was a view of black family life. Based on the ratings, these shows were enjoyed regardless if the viewer had firsthand knowledge of black life or if the shows mimicked the viewer's own life.

Thomas Ford discussed the stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans and noted that African-Americans are not only limited to appearing in comedies but their characters are based on disparaging stereotypes.¹⁰³¹ However, I believe this was not the case for black family television shows between 1980 and 2000. The shows reviewed in this study all portrayed characters in positive familial situations. In addition, the findings of this study confirm that the characters in the episodes assessed were true representations of black families. All of the shows portrayed at least one or more of the strengths identified as belonging to African-American families. Six of the shows, *A Different World*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Amen*, *Family Matters*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, 227, and *The Cosby Show*, had at least one episode that depicted four or five of the strengths. Three of the shows, *The Jeffersons*, *Webster*, and *Cosby*, showed moderate strengths of black families with at least one episode that depicted three strengths.

By framing a show, the positive attributes of a family can be exhibited and can be used positively to influence the behavior of the viewer who can identify with its storylines.¹⁰³² Early in this study, it was noted that a survey of black viewers of *The Cosby Show* revealed that many did not feel that the show was a true representation of

¹⁰³¹ Thomas Ford, Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals of African Americans on Person Perception, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 60, 3 (September 1997): 267.

¹⁰³² Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 50.

black lives, but they did recognize attributes of their families in the depictions. Recall the comments made to *New York Times* blogger Katherine Schulten about their experience watching *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. The commenters stated “It was very comedic, but at the same time, a family show that you could learn many things from...this show is very realistic, brings real-life situations into perspective, and really shows the truth of how situations...like family issues...is (are) really like...It is a show where people can learn many valuable life lessons.”¹⁰³³ Those viewers recognized aspects of family life that resembled theirs. Some things portrayed in those show were realistic and equated to aspects of their own lives. The shows portrayed strengths of black families, thus the families were depicted in a manner realistic to black family life.

The results of the current study should be used to encourage further research of black culture, black families, and black entertainment. Because television is a tool for social learning, researchers should continue to assess the content of African-American television shows. Black people watch more television than any other race and as such deserve good positive representations of their lives. Research into how black lives are portrayed, and, by using that research to produce positive and culturally realistic renderings of black life, can offer a glimpse into black culture, and encourage respect for cultural diversity.

As Allison and Alameen-Shavers noted, the role of the black actor has always been to represent the race. That is still true today. The difference is that many of those

¹⁰³³ Sneha_MrC_P7, September 27, 2014 (12:13 p.m. ET), comment on Katherine Schulten, “What Television Shows Have Mattered to You?” *The New York Times: The Learning Network* (blog), September 25, 2014, https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/what-television-shows-have-mattered-to-you/?_r=0.

representations of blackness seen on television are of reality stars, who are outrageous, overdramatized, violent, uncivilized, and in most cases, embarrassing.¹⁰³⁴ In 2002, the NAACP reported that from 1999 to 2000 not one major network primetime television show featured a lead actor of color.¹⁰³⁵ Between fall 2011 and fall 2012, none of the 27 new situational comedy shows had a person of color as lead or in a significant role.¹⁰³⁶ Recently, there has been a rise in black representation in dramas and a few in comedies (i.e., *Scandal*, *Empire*, *Black-ish*, *How to Get Away with Murder*). Those characters are complex, strong, and accomplished, especially the female characters.¹⁰³⁷ However, the number of black cast shows on major television, comedies or otherwise, are not as abundant as those shows between 1980 and 2000.

Assessing what was popular black television during a time in American history when black people seemed to be advancing in society¹⁰³⁸ could be beneficial in program planning to develop good quality and responsible television. Television that depicts popular culture is a potentially powerful tool for change.¹⁰³⁹ Although the family and other traditional institutions are the major transmitters of values in the socialization process, television competes with these institutions.¹⁰⁴⁰ As such, parents, teachers,

¹⁰³⁴ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xiii.

¹⁰³⁵ Sarah Nilsen, Sarah Turner, *The Colorblind Screen: Television I Post Racial America*, New York University Press, New York, 2014, 238.

¹⁰³⁶ Sarah Nilsen, Sarah Turner, *The Colorblind Screen: Television I Post Racial America*, New York University Press, New York, 2014, 238.

¹⁰³⁷ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Donnetrice Alison, *Black Women's Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, xix.

¹⁰³⁸ Gil Troy, *Morning in America*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, 184-185.

¹⁰³⁹ Jannette Dates, Thomas Mascaro, African Americans in Film and Television, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 33, 2 (Summer 2005): 50.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Gordon Berry, Black Family Life on Television and the Socialization of the African American Child; Images of Marginality, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29, 2 (summer 1998): 233.

government entities, advertisers, broadcasters, and creative professionals should capitalize on television's potential to influence society positively.

Television teaches its viewers about role expectations, behavior, and attitudes.¹⁰⁴¹ It has the greatest potential to shape cultural perceptions and attitudes.¹⁰⁴² By portraying black families in a positive light, black family television programming may provide positive role models that promote positive behaviors and attitudes.¹⁰⁴³ This study suggests that more research and discourse pertaining to black representation in the media, and how it is understood in African-American culture is needed.

¹⁰⁴¹ Gordon Berry, Black Family Life on Television and the Socialization of the African American Child; Images of Marginality, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29, 2 (summer 1998): 238, 239.

¹⁰⁴² Jerome Schiele, The Personal Responsibility Act of 1996: THE Bitter and The Sweet for African American Families, *Families in Society*, 79, 4 (July/August, 1998): 426.

¹⁰⁴³ Carloyn Stroman, Bishetta Merritt, Black Family Imagery and Interactions on Television, *Journal of Black Studies*, 23, 4 (June 1993): 498.

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227

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