

ADAM SANDLER: MENTOR OF
MIDDLE-CLASS MASCULINITY AND MANHOOD

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By
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

I am dedicating this work to my three dear friends: Ronda James, Candace Paulson, and Michele Sniegoski. Ronda's encouragement and obedience to the Lord gave me what I needed to go back to school with significant health issues and so late in life. Candace, who graduated from Stanford "back in the olden days," to quote our kids, inspired me to follow my dream and become all God wants me to be. Michele's long struggle with terminal kidney disease motivated me to keep living in spite of my own health issues. We have laughed and cried together over many years, but all of you have given me strength to carry on. Sorry two of you made it to heaven before I could get this finished.

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I also want to thank Dr. Sam Regalado for his help and encouragement. Keeping this work on track as a history paper was important to its natural conclusion and my sanity. He also is an excellent teacher and fun to tease. I'm still not sorry about my interpretation of the Daniel's book – it needs to be re-done.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Abstract	ix
Middle-class Masculinities in Late Twentieth-Century America: The National Conversation	9
Masculinity, Fatherhood, and Film	26
Formation of Adam Sandler’s Masculinity	36
Natal Family and Childhood	36
University and Early Career	39
Comedy Family	48
Marriage and Fatherhood	50
An Overview of Sandler’s Lessons in Masculinity	54
Key Masculine Roles: The Bully	55
Key Masculine Roles: Extended Adolescence	57
Key Themes: Heterosexual Engagement with Homosexuality	62
Key Characterizations: The One and Only Girl for Him	64
Key Characterizations: Family and Fatherhood	67
Key Themes: College Education	72
Key Themes: Masculinity and Body Image	73
Key Themes: Joking as Communication	77
Serious Roles for Sandler’s Masculinities	79
Film Analysis	82
Examples of Masculinities and Fatherhood in <i>Grown Ups</i>	82
Examples of Masculinity in <i>I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry</i>	97
Examples of Masculinity and Fatherhood in <i>Spanglish</i>	110
Examples of Masculinity in <i>The Waterboy</i>	120
Conclusion	129
References	136

Appendices

A. Adam Sandler Filmography Used For This Thesis.....	168
B. “Stan the Man” Lyrics.....	170
C. Gross Receipts American Theatres	172

ABSTRACT

Adam Sandler's films are his way of influencing American males to ascribe to an educated, middle-class form of manhood. Due to the influence of feminism, and the values instilled by his father, he adheres to a policy of acceptance for homosexuals, is respectful and sensitive toward females, and seeks to be an excellent husband and father, both on screen and off. This thesis looks at his life and his professional work from a historical perspective to determine the sources of his theories of masculinity. It reviews trends and tropes in his body of work and then dissects four films to take a closer look at the interpretations and messages regarding masculinity and manhood imbedded in them. The films closely analyzed are *Grown Ups*, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry*, *Spanglish*, and *The Waterboy*.

MIDDLE-CLASS MASCULINITIES IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY

AMERICA: THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

Film critics of Adam Sandler's comedies show a nearly universal condemnation of his films.¹ However, this is contradicted by the seven People's Choice Awards, three Emmy nominations, and one Golden Globe nomination he has received thus far. According to film scholar Aaron Taylor "The popular sympathy, and critical antipathy, that Sandler's work provokes can be traced to his specific mobilizations of timely and resonant beliefs about maleness as a social condition."² Adam Sandler is primarily thought of as a comedian due to his work with the television program *Saturday Night Live*, but he is much more than a comedian. He is considered to be "one of the most prominent male actors of the past generation,"³ and his films influence all levels of society, reaching all ages, genders, and economic backgrounds. He offers his audiences masculine role models that are attainable by the 'average guy,' rather than elitist models which are more difficult to achieve. According to fashion critic Pamela Keogh, Sandler dresses in baggy shorts and t-shirts, topped with a flannel shirt, purposely to show the public that he is just a regular kind of guy.⁴

¹ Taylor, 19.

² Ibid., 21.

³ Timothy Shary, *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 10.

⁴ Michael A. Schuman, *Adam Sandler: Celebrity with Heart*. (Berkeley Heights, N.J., 2011), 77.

Ultimately, his films are cultural artifacts embedded with social commentary, and as an actor, Sandler chooses film roles that reflect important historical changes in American masculinity and fatherhood.⁵ He selects these roles in an attempt to contribute to a continuing national conversation⁶ in the media concerning masculinity that has occupied a prominent place in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America. (For the purposes of this thesis, the term “national conversation” will refer to the discussion that takes place in the popular media.) His motive is to promote what is termed here as *companionate family values*; defined by equality and freedom of choice in gender roles, plus an abiding belief that family, especially children, are top priority.⁷ His portrayals are designed to demonstrate that middle-class manhood, through higher education, responsible choices, and gainful employment, is the most successful. He also presents an image of manhood that accepts Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Trans-gender (henceforth LGBT) people as valuable members of society.

This thesis makes its argument in five parts. First it will lay a ground-work by discussing the three major developments that shaped the national popular culture conversation regarding gender that occurred during the twenty- five years following

⁵ For the film, *Anger Management*, Sandler was paid twenty-five million dollars, plus twenty-five percent of the gross (\$150,000,000) giving him another thirty-seven and a half million dollars, so presumably, he has the freedom to choose. “Adam Sandler Net Worth,” *Celebrity Net Worth*. <http://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/richest-comedians/adam-sandler-net-worth/>. Accessed 11/26/2013.

⁶ Because media considerations of manhood, masculinity, and fatherhood are aimed at national (if mostly white) audiences, it is appropriate to call this a 'national conversation.'

⁷ Jessica Weiss, “Making Room for Fathers,” in *A Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender*, ed. Laura McCall and Donald Yacovone, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 349 -350.

World War II. This section focuses on the crises⁸ of American masculinity and fatherhood during the early years of the masculinity movement, and evidence of the source of Sandler's masculine values and motives is provided. The second part, is a discussion of male-centric films and their importance in interpreting new masculinities. This is followed by an historical review of the formation of Adam Sandler's personal masculinity and that of his generation of males. The fourth section focuses on the tropes Sandler chooses to emphasize, along with a review of the scholarly literature critiquing Sandler's portrayals of masculinity. The final part is an in-depth analysis of four of Sandler's films, focusing on his interpretation of manhood, especially the influences of *Playboy*, second wave feminist thought, and the gay pride movement (herein labeled LGBT). This section will also highlight Sandler's core values on the subjects of manhood and masculinity and show that he purposely designs the messages of the films to teach his values to his audience.

For the purpose of this discussion, the terms *manhood* and *masculinity* need to be distinguished from each other. Using Michael Kimmel's definitions, *manhood* is understood to express the "capacity for autonomy and responsibility...the opposite of childhood," or dependency, while "*masculinity* must constantly be demonstrated"⁹ so that a man is not perceived as feminine or homosexual. Masculinity then, is a moving target, always changing with society's fluctuations, while manhood is relatively

⁸ During the early years of second wave feminism and the subsequent wave of the exploration of masculinity both genders attempted to argue that theirs was victimized by the other. This, then leads to a crisis mentality, which has waned as new gains have been made.

⁹ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. (New York: The Free Press), 1996. 119-120.

definable.¹⁰ These terms will be applied to Sandler's film portrayals in contrast with other adolescent- male genre films, and in terms of Sandler's message design,¹¹ in other words, what he is trying to teach the audience.

Gender Studies scholar Victoria Robinson, citing T. Edwards' *Cultural Masculinities* (2006), states that there have been three main waves in the study of masculinity and men. The first wave began in the 1970s and developed the sex role model regarding masculinity. The second wave evolved during the 1980s using the model of western, educated, middle-class masculinity, which failed to address homosexual, racial, and working-class values. This wave focused on male power relations and their meanings and operations. The third wave, which began in the 1990s, has focused on post-structuralist theory. This work is interdisciplinary and emphasizes sexuality, normative behaviors, and performativity.¹² Based on Sandler's age and the years of his college education (1984–1988), his adolescent years clearly fall into the second wave time frame, and many of the messages about masculinity offered by Sandler and his cohorts show the effects of the impact feminism and gay rights have had on both women and men.

¹⁰ Sandler's films demonstrate white, middle-class manhood, as well as various forms of masculinity. These will be discussed fully in later chapters.

¹¹ "Message design logic represents the extent to which people can produce messages that accomplish their goals in alignment with the receiver's goals." See Gwen A. Hullman, "Interpersonal Communication Motives and Message Design Logic," in *Communication Monographs* 71:2 (June 2004), 208-225.

<http://www.informaworld.com.ezproxy.lib.csustan.edu:2048/smpp/section?content=a71373...>
Accessed 5/3/2010.

¹² Victoria Robinson, "Men, Masculinities and Feminism" in *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, ed. Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson. (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 58.

Three major developments during the twenty-five years following the Second World War shaped the national pop-culture conversation surrounding gender: the first was the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, written by biologist and sex researcher, Alfred Kinsey in 1948. It sold two hundred thousand copies in its first month and it exposed the shocking statistic that thirty-seven percent of all males had enjoyed at least one homosexual encounter. This was the catalyst that ignited the open dialogue which facilitated change in America's perception of homosexual behavior. At the time, homosexuality was illegal, considered by many to be immoral, thought to be a form of mental illness, and men who were homosexual were judged as failures in manhood.¹³ During the next few years, thousands of American men and women employed by the military and the federal government were fired due to their homosexuality in what was known as the Lavender Scare. The government's position was that gays were more susceptible to blackmail and therefore a security risk in the Cold War environment. This prompted President Dwight D. Eisenhower to sign Executive Order 10450 banning employment of homosexuals in government or by government contractors on April 27, 1953.¹⁴ Three years later, psychologist Evelyn Hooker presented her research to the American Psychological Association in a paper titled, "The Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual." It concluded that there was little difference between hetero- and

¹³ Vicki L. Eaklor, "Homosexuality," in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret Carroll. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 216-219.

¹⁴ See "Timeline: Milestones in American Gay Rights Movement," on *American Experience* at PBS.org. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/stonewall/> for broad coverage of events. Also, Vicki L. Eaklor, "Homosexuality" in Carroll, 218.

homosexuals and the paper was very influential in altering clinical responsiveness to homosexuality.¹⁵

Public opinion slowly began to shift, thus opening the door for homosexual organizations and publications, which helped homosexuals embark on a path of public debate in order to further change perceptions and put an end to the persecution of gays and lesbians. The cause was aided when the “United States Supreme Court rule[d] in favor of the First Amendment rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) magazine, *One: The Homosexual Magazine*,” on January 13, 1958.¹⁶ The suit was filed because the FBI and the Postal Service deemed the magazine obscene. The court’s decision was undermined by public opinion for over ten years. By June 28, 1969, homosexuals had finally had their fill of being marginalized and harassed when the New York City police raided a gay bar known as the Stonewall Inn.¹⁷ Police raids were common at the time, but the violence, which bled out into the street that evening, lasted six days. Years later, many of the gays involved expressed sentiments that they finally felt empowered by fighting back rather than quietly acquiescing to the persecution they regularly experienced.¹⁸ This was an important step in laying a foundation for individualism in the ways Americans defined their own gendered lives.

The second major development in the conversation surrounding gender and sexuality was the advent of *Playboy* magazine, which Hugh Hefner, a disciple of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ George Donelson Moss, *Moving On: The American People Since 1945*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2010), 143.

¹⁸ “Milestones in the American Gay Rights Movement,” *American Experience*, PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/stonewall/>. Accessed 1/6/2013.

Kinsey's work, began publishing in December of 1953.¹⁹ Though his target audience was male, Hefner revolutionized sexuality for both genders with his full- color centerfolds and controversial articles. According to scholar Bill Osgerby, *Playboy's* success heralded a "transformation of American sexual morals," a legitimizing of "pornography within mainstream culture," and a rise of masculine identities that "embraced affluence, sophistication, lighthearted leisure, and sexual license."²⁰ The publication promoted bachelorhood as the ideal state for men because it allowed them to pursue a variety of sexual partners and experiences. Through *Playboy*, the ideal of the 1950s middle-class, family man (whose fatherhood role included close interaction with his children) was confronted with a different option: the urbane bachelor model. In Hefner's view, masculinity was measured by the number of women a man had sex with. *Playboy* also spawned a more vivid sexualized image of females that gave men tacit permission to value women for their physical characteristics rather than for qualities normally associated with the ideal middle-class wife. Hefner's message, that the homemaker role was no longer the only feminine ideal, brought an entirely new level of sexual objectification into the national conversation. This conversation took place not only in the media, but in the homes and bedrooms of Hefner's readership. This was significant because it too spoke to the controversial issue about individualism in gender roles for both American males and females: again, traditional

¹⁹ Bill Osgerby "Playboy Magazine," in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret Carroll. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 361-362.

²⁰ Ibid.

models were being challenged. *Playboy* remained highly influential throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

The third major development in shaping the national pop-culture conversation occurred ten years later when Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, set off a firestorm of debate in America and ignited the second wave of feminism by challenging the traditional image of the happy housewife from a female perspective: clearly, not all women were happy in that role.²¹ Her publisher initially printed two thousand copies, but *McCall's Magazine* and *LadiesHome Journal* used excerpts, boosting sales dramatically; the first paperback edition sold 1.4 million copies.²²

The feminist revival was primarily a movement of educated, white middle-class women, but quickly moved beyond that as the leaders began writing articles for popular women's magazines. Liberal feminism brought out concerns about social equality, sexuality, reproductive rights, and sexism.²³ The ensuing national debate was enthusiastic, and sometimes strident, as it addressed male chauvinism, gender inequality, sexual objectification, and violence against women and children, all of which feminists saw as unacceptable in a modern society. Overall, the message of the time was one of victimization but as a result of feminist influence, increasing numbers of men began to participate more domestically and to encourage their wives'

²¹ Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*. 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 74

²² Peter Drier, "Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*: 50 Years Later," in *truthout | history* (Feb. 17, 2013). <http://truth-out.org/news/item/14514-betty-friedans-the-feminine-mystique-50-years-later>. Accessed 2/12/2014.

²³ Martha Rampton, "The Three Waves of Feminism," *The Magazine of Pacific University* (Fall 2008), 1. http://www.pacificu.edu/magazine_archives/2008/fall/echoes/feminism.cfm. Accessed 12/05/2013.

career aspirations.²⁴ This too, was about individualism in the gendered lives of Americans: women were becoming free to choose work over housewifery as men were forced to choose which household chores they were willing to handle or risk being shortchanged in the bedroom.

The 1960s American gender role revolution, working through popular-culture books and magazines, allowed both men and women opportunities to re-examine their emotional well-being and reevaluate what defined them as individuals. In response to the feminist rhetoric of the late 1960s, which challenged conventional forms of masculinity, and the popular focus on emotional well-being that developed in the 1970s, many men began their own search for identity and for new definitions of manhood and masculinity in what became known as the *Men's Movement*. Much like the divisions within the feminist movement, the men's movement split and reformed repeatedly in order to encompass the differing views and strategies of its leaders. It eventually developed into three broad categories: *pro-feminist*, *pro-masculinist*, and *anti-feminist*,²⁵ all of which Sandler engages in his films.

The pro-feminist men's movements adopted the egalitarian ideology of mainstream liberal feminists. Their efforts sought to oppose discriminatory practices and negative opinions aimed at women and homosexuals. They attempted these changes through organized political efforts and by way of interpersonal conversations. Their goal was to advance the cause of feminism, allowing women to

²⁴ Bret E. Carroll, "Feminism," in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret Carroll. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 169.

²⁵ Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*. 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 88.

have more choices and opportunities in their lives, and to accomplish that, they had to rethink masculinity. Many of these men believed that a commitment to social justice and human rights was inherent to being a ‘real man,’ and this meant accepting homosexuals as valuable human beings with rights. Many men also lamented that traditional masculinity had taught them not to express their emotions, which often made their lives feel less rewarding. The movement encouraged men to “get in touch with their feelings and to be more sensitive, caring, open, and able to engage in meaningful, close relationships.”²⁶ There were a number of men, who founded national organizations such as the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS), which urged men to end violence against women and homosexuals, and also addressed other destructive behaviors often engaged in by males.²⁷

Some groups, such as Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP), specifically targeted male violence and aggression, which they viewed as part of American socialization of boys. They felt this to be especially true in sports and in the military, where males are taught “that violence is an appropriate means of gaining and maintaining control over others and of winning.”²⁸ Philosopher and sociologist Miriam Miedzian affirms the anti-violence stance of some of the pro-feminists when she states,

There are endless role models of great conquerors, heroic warriors, and brave soldiers. It is not only patriotism that leads so many parents to

²⁶ Ibid., 89.

²⁷ Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, 9th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2009), 87.

²⁸ Wood, 9th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2009), 89.

acquiesce in the sacrifice of their sons in unnecessary wars, but also pride in their sons' manhood.²⁹

Additionally, constant competition in sports programs instills children with the sense that winning is good and losing is bad. They become so “imbued with the glory of winning” that they want to fight in a war for the opportunity to prove their manhood and win.³⁰ The groups were committed to challenging and changing the ways culture and individual men defined and expressed masculinity, especially in conjunction with women. Meanwhile, other groups focused more on re-establishing men as leaders.

A reactionary response to feminism was offered by what is labeled the *pro-masculinist movement*. The men who comprised it generally considered feminist men to be soft, and felt that males should be the leaders of their homes and families. These groups intended to reestablish pride in being “real men,” meaning “the traditional macho image – tough, rugged, invulnerable, and self-reliant.”³¹ They wanted females to treat them with deference and to take subordinate roles, but also felt that their own manhood should not be tied to the breadwinner role because it meant men were measured by their titles and paychecks.³² Many of these men were willing to allow their wives to take employment as long as they continued to maintain the children and home in the traditional manner. In other words, wives should acquiesce to their husbands' wishes, bring in additional revenue, continue as the main caregivers of the children, keep the home in order, and prepare tasty and nourishing

²⁹ Myriam Miedzian, *Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence*. (New York: Lantern Books, 2002), 33-34 .

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Wood, 92-93.

³² Ibid.

meals for the family, but these same women should appreciate their husbands as human beings, not just breadwinners.

In responding to feminism some men felt the need to delve more deeply into their psyches in order to help define their manhood. The Mythopoetic Movement quickly became a key segment within pro-masculinist men's movements. It was launched in 1990 by the publication of *Iron John*, written by American Poet Laureate and scholar Robert Bly.³³ "Central to modern man's emotional emptiness is father hunger, a yearning need to be close to another man and to build deep, spiritual bonds with him."³⁴ Miedzian confirms Bly's assessment by stating that, "the best available data suggest that high levels of violent behavior are frequently linked to a boy's having had inadequate fathering."³⁵ Mythopoetic men believe that American males are not only hungry for fathers but also desperate for male mentors, which they need to grow into successful manhood. They argue that American society desperately needs new ways of teaching men how to be men and fathers, and their position is that men need to define themselves not only in response to women, but also, more crucially, through homosocial interactions with men. They maintain that the lack of ceremony, or rite of passage, that delineates boyhood from manhood, creates a problem for western males.³⁶ Some mythopoetic groups revolved around embracing earlier archetypes of manly behaviors by adapting male rituals of ancient cultures in

³³ *Iron John* spent thirty weeks as a national best-seller, an indication of its appeal to a wide audience.

³⁴ Wood, 95.

³⁵ Miedzian, 80.

³⁶ Robert Bly, *Iron John*. (New York: Random House, 1990), 14-15. Also, Wood, 4th ed. 95. Also Mark Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes: The Changing Face of American Manhood*. (Houghton Mifflin Co.: New York, 1992), 173.

order to release *the wild man* (*Iron John*) or *the inner warrior* inside of them. Some late twentieth and early twenty-first century Gen X films such as *Old School* (2003) and *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (2004), have portrayed this movement.

In addition to *Iron John*, there were quite a number of books written for a non-scholarly audience that aimed at raising American's awareness. Three of these were extremely influential in helping men adopt a new way of thinking about masculinity. The first to be published was entitled *Games People Play*, by author and psychiatrist Eric Berne, the creator of Transactional Analysis. It was a layman's guide designed to help people understand personalities – their own and other's – and to help them communicate more effectively. Published in 1964, it was one of the first books designed to take psychology to the masses, selling over five million copies. One of Berne's students, Thomas A. Harris, followed up on Berne's work with a book of his own, *I'm Okay -You're Okay*; in it Harris asserts "that man has a multiple nature."³⁷ First published in 1967, it made the *New York Times* Bestseller List in 1972 where it remained for two years. It has sold over fifteen million copies, which is an indication of its penetration into American culture.³⁸ Then in 1975, Jesuit priest John Powell wrote *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* which encouraged readers to be themselves and not fear rejection due to their perceived inadequacies. Through these books, and others like them, the traditional stoic façade used by white American males to create their masculine personas began to crumble.

³⁷ Thomas A. Harris, *I'm Ok – You're OK*. (Harper & Row: New York, 1969). 1.

³⁸ Bruce Handy, "The Lives They Lived: Thomas A. Harris..." *Health*, *New York Times*, December 31, 1995. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/31/magazine/the-lives-they-lived-thomas-a-harris-ich-bin-ok-du-bist-ok.html>. Accessed 3/7/2013.

By this point in the 1970s both men and women were fully engaged in creating new roles for themselves, both at home and in the public sphere. Young men were empowered to speak up against the war in Vietnam even if it made them look less masculine. They had also discovered that not all women were attracted to the traditional masculine roles that had defined prior generations of men.

In 1982 author and communicator Mark Gerzon's book, *A Choice of Heroes: The Changing Faces of American Manhood*, added to the on-going pro-masculinist conversation. The book cites five traditional archetypes of masculinity: *soldier*, *frontiersman*, *breadwinner*, *expert*, and *lord*. His premise is that men actively pursue one or more of those roles in order to define themselves, and he believes that these archetypes exist because at one time they were useful in American culture. Boys followed in the images their fathers and grandfathers had set out for them, but he believes that men today try to model themselves after Hollywood's portrayal of masculine roles that...may be entirely fictitious. He states, "To model oneself after another man is in itself problematic. But to model oneself after an image of a man, repackaged for the camera, is dangerous. In comparing themselves to the dashing figure riding off into the setting sun or racing across the goal line, ordinary men in everyday life cannot help but feel overshadowed."³⁹ Gerzon believes feminism, forced males to re-evaluate traditional roles and make changes.

Popular magazines and newspapers, as well as television and radio talk shows, reported and commented on each movement, which created widespread awareness of,

³⁹ Gerzon, 5.

and became integral to, the conversation. As one might expect, each segment of the masculinity movement – pro-feminist, pro-masculinist, and anti-feminist - developed a following of men who embraced its ideology. The self-help books and the public dialogue that ensued from them naturally affected parents’ attitudes and ideals. The Generation X boys, born during the 1960s, were raised in the midst of this national conversation. These males were also influenced by the liberal feminist concept of gender equality which stressed individuality, tolerance, and the idea that it was acceptable to reject traditional gendered stereotypes. Sandler’s birth in Brooklyn, New York in September 1966 placed him firmly in this group.

The prior generation of men had been raised to embrace their primary role as a good provider. This group was also expected to actively father their children, but often found that they had little time to do so.⁴⁰ However, with the rise of men’s movements and pop-psychology came the acknowledgement that interactive fathers could play an important role in helping children develop into successful and content adults. Men began to recognize, and then argue, that fatherhood was central to their masculine identity, and that they should play a greater role in defining it.⁴¹ Family relations became a growing concern in the on-going popular conversation in America about masculinity during the late twentieth century. Old models of the patriarch, the moral overseer, and the breadwinner, as well as the companionate form of marriage⁴²

⁴⁰ Jessica Weiss, in *A Shared Experience*, ed. McCall and Yacovone, 350 and 353.

⁴¹ Calinda N. Lee, “Father’s Rights,” in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, edited by Bret Carroll. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 166.

⁴² Historian Anya Jabour’s work, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* describes a companionate marriage as a “loving partnership of equals,” though in reality it was simply a gentler form of patriarchy.

were analyzed and revised to fit contemporary culture in America.

According to scholar Joseph A. Pleck

A new image, summed up in the term ‘the new father,’ is clearly on the rise in print and broadcast media. This new father differs from older images of involved fatherhood in several key respects: he is present at the birth; he is involved with his children as infants, not just when they are older; he participates in the actual day-to-day work of child care, and not just play; he is involved with his daughters as much as his sons.⁴³

The model of ‘the new father’ partially owes itself to feminist analyses that considered men to be diminished and cheated if they did not actively participate in child-rearing. Men began to argue for their rights as fathers during divorce proceedings, which eventually led to the 1970s no-fault divorce laws and advancements in equal parenting time. These men labeled the custom of assigning child-rearing to mothers as unfair to men and their children, and helped lead to the formation of fathers’ rights organizations.⁴⁴ Additionally, various pieces of state and federal legislation strengthened the rights of men as caregivers. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) allowed some employees to take unpaid leave for specific family and medical reasons without losing their position. The act gave both men and women eligibility to take up to twelve workweeks of leave for the birth, adoption, or new foster care placement of a child; to care for a spouse, child, or parent with a serious medical condition; or for a serious medical condition of the

⁴³ Joseph H. Pleck, “American Fathering in Historical Perspective,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael Kimmel (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 93.

⁴⁴ Calinda N. Lee, “Father’s Rights,” in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, edited by Bret Carroll. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 166.

employee.⁴⁵ These newly evolved models of gender and family relations grew to be the standard for the Gen X population.

The national conversations surrounding masculinities that took place in late-twentieth-century America were greatly influenced by the Kinsey report which had kicked off the gradual rise in tolerance toward homosexuality which became the norm for Sandler's generation (if only to maintain political correctness). Next, Hefner's message offered an alternative to heterosexual men to engage in varied sexual experiences, and to women to be valued for their sexuality, rather than for their homemaking skills. Then Friedan's book sparked a lively debate that caused American men to re-evaluate their lives and their husband and fatherhood roles. Where men failed to make appropriate changes, many women felt free to express their displeasure, such as during the 1969 Chicano Youth Conference in Denver. When male leadership relegated women to kitchen chores rather than allowing them to participate in the discussions, the Chicanas walked out in protest. All of these events and conversations presented young, white middle-class men of the late twentieth century with a wide range of options and questions as they sought to fashion identities for themselves. Adam Sandler made it his mission to use film to guide them in their quest.

⁴⁵ Family and Medical Leave Act, U.S. Dept. of Labor. <http://www.dol.gov/whd/fmla/>. Accessed 2/1/2014.

MASCULINITY, FATHERHOOD, AND FILM

A number of late twentieth century films participated in the national discussion of masculine identities and fatherhood. Films such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Mr. Mom* (1983), and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) highlighted the changing attitudes of American society regarding topics central to masculinity, fatherhood, marriage, divorce, child care, and child custody. All of the films' fathers exhibit traditional heterosexual behavior via marriage and reproduction, but as life-altering experiences occur, they adapt to the circumstances, and rethink their masculine identity through a dynamic interchange with women. These were clearly attempts to change America's attitudes regarding fatherhood through popular culture and the medium of film.

Lately, academics have begun to examine Adam Sandler and his generation of filmmakers. Particularly relevant is film scholar Timothy Shary's recent book, *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*, in which he argues that movies are an excellent medium to help better comprehend the ways American men conceptualize masculinity and the ways men, and the perceptions of them, have been evolving in contemporary America. Films are ideal due to the wide variety of themes and their dependence on box office success, which enables analysis of ticket sales and DVD sales and rentals.⁴⁶ Shary argues that there has been a significant change in the ways men are being depicted in American cinema since the

⁴⁶ Shary, 4. Also, see Appendix C.

1990s. The new portrayals show complex and thoughtful masculine roles and ideals, but at the same time “challenge perceived norms about sexuality and sexual preference, social identities and expectations, power and strength, and the very essence of what ‘being a man’ means.”⁴⁷ This is of particular importance because the constructions of masculinities in popular films help American males define manhood and shape their own individual forms of masculinity.⁴⁸ Films also present a variety of fatherhood styles to help men determine the ways in which they want to parent. Masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel agrees; “Images of gender in the media become texts on normative behavior, one of many cultural shards we use to construct notions of masculinity.”⁴⁹ The problem with this idea, however, is that no one can predict how or whether an individual audience member will receive the filmmakers’ intended message. Nonetheless, Sandler’s portrayals of masculinity serve to paint pictures that males can see and choose to emulate or avoid.

Adam Sandler’s films began to appear several years after the Hollywood model that Susan Jeffords calls “hard body” and which she describes as the “re-articulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented models.”⁵⁰ These films, such as *Top Gun* (1986),⁵¹ were indicative of the highly politicized re-militarization and general conservative trend in America during

⁴⁷ Shary, 1.

⁴⁸ Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice IV*. (London: Routledge, 2008), 170.

⁴⁹ Michael Kimmel, “Introduction,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, 20.

⁵⁰ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 13.

⁵¹ *Top Gun* was released slightly over five years after the Iran hostage affair at a time when Reagan was valiantly pushing for America’s redemption on the foreign policy stage.

the Ronald Reagan presidency in the 1980s. Film scholar Peter Alilunas credits Adam Sandler's film, *Happy Gilmore* (1996), with the shift that has revised Hollywood's hardbody portrayals of masculinity seen during the 1980s, to the new "internalized masculine dimension" in which men explore their moral dilemmas, emotional upsets and psychological aims.⁵² Sandler still continues to address the negative aspects of the idealized hyper-masculine body builder in an effort to address steroid use by young males (*50 First Dates* is the most obvious).

According to scholar Steve Vineberg, there are several comic film genres; *high comedy*, also known as *comedy of manners*, pits aristocratic behaviors against those of the lower classes; *romantic comedy*, also known as *screwball comedy*, is America's favorite; and usually begins with a male and a female in adversarial positions. The *bromance* is a homosocial rendition of the same theme. *Situation comedy* is motivated by the difficulty of the situation or event, such as trying to engineer a wedding in *Father of the Bride* (1991). *Parody* consists of benign spoof, but *satire*, the tougher cousin of parody, is founded on the idea "that its target is malignant and deserves to be exposed."⁵³ *Burlesque* is traditionally considered *low comedy*, relying on physical comedy such as pratfalls; in today's vernacular the *animal comedy* and the *dude flick* are burlesque.⁵⁴ The *animal comedy* is a film genre in which foul language, anti-social behavior, drug use, and poor life choices

⁵² Peter Alilunas, "Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure: The Frat Pack, Women, and the Trauma of Victimization in the "Dude Flick." *Academia.edu: Peter Alilunas*. Page 2. <http://umich.academia.edu/PeterAlilunas>. Accessed 4/5/2013.

⁵³ Steve Vineberg, *High Comedy in American Movies: Class and Humor from the 1920s to the Present*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

abound and sometimes serve to inform viewers that these constitute acceptable behavior. While some of Sandler's characters begin here, as a rule, they progress to adopting the feminist ideal of masculine behavior.

In his documentary regarding the history of film, Mark Cousins interviews screen writer Edward Neumeier, who comments that humor allows filmmakers to address difficult political subjects, but because the subject is skewed, the filmmakers can get away with the remarks, even though it might be controversial.⁵⁵ Sandler's *You Don't Mess With the Zohan* is a perfect example of humor addressing a difficult political issue. According to Vineberg, "the boundaries that separate these comic genres are extremely fluid, and often movie comedy thrives on combinations of several different genres;"⁵⁶ this is the case for most of Sandler's films.

Sandler often uses a convention in filmmaking known as the *buddy film* which consists of two men, from substantially divergent personalities and/or backgrounds, who are forced to undertake a journey or accomplish a task. At first the differences cause frustrations, but as the story progresses the men embark on a friendship that helps them in their quest. According to scholar Philippa Gates, cultural changes brought about shifts in buddy films because feminist gains and an incipient men's movement prompted more serious, dramatic, and sometimes tragic, explorations of male friendship.⁵⁷ Buddy films were brought into the realm of law enforcement during the 1980s conservative political climate of the Reagan presidency. This was an era of

⁵⁵ Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, Part 14, 2011. Turner Classic Movies.

⁵⁶ Vineberg, 4.

⁵⁷ Philippa Gates. "Buddy Films," in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Bret Carroll, ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 74.

action heroes, with hyper-masculinized bodies and violent propensities that blended patriotism, heroism, and masculinity, into an ideal of manhood to which few could attain. The 1990s brought buddy films into more realistic portrayals of masculinity, which included the sensitive male. Although buddy films have always altered to adapt to ever-changing American social and cultural concerns, invariably the personality and background differences fall away and the protagonists' shared masculine identity prevails over all else in the face of threats to masculinity.⁵⁸ According to Maria San Filippo, "In surveying the genre's path of transformation from its 1970s tragic mode to its current comic mode, these readings remain telling for the way the buddy film continues to display sexual ambiguity and nostalgia for adolescence."⁵⁹ This transformation also took on an updated designation: the *bromance*. At its most conventional, the bromance promotes marriage, but simultaneously attempts to limit the marriage relationship in order to prevent the loss of the male/male platonic friendship. At its most controversial, the genre has been moving ever closer to endorsing homo- or bi-sexuality.⁶⁰

Some of Sandler's films fall into a category known as the *dude flick*, a genre generally defined by its immature portrayals of masculinity, most often in direct opposition to feminist values. These films also feature unsophisticated humor about bodily functions, sex, and sexuality. Film scholar Aaron Taylor argues that the dude flick genre brings out anarchic features instead of those that are conformist in nature, and

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75. *The Bucket List* (2007) is an example of concerns of aging baby-boomers

⁵⁹ Maria San Filippo. "More than Buddies: *Wedding Crashers* and the Bromance as Comedy of (re)Marriage Equality," in *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*, Timothy Shary, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 183.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 197.

states that they create agitated presentations of themes, such as the feminization of protracted adolescence, the pretense of virility, and the tiresomeness of serial monogamy. Nevertheless, as the man-child progresses, “Old masculinity, with its investment in work, responsibility, marriage, and family, consistently trumps new masculinity’s preference for play, self-interest, serial monogamy, and fraternity.”⁶¹ Dude Flicks also often contain a priggish, unethical traditionalist who receives punishment for being a poor representation of manhood, and this makes a connection with audience members who may feel similar type of oppression in their own lives.

The post-hard-body commentaries on masculinity, manhood, and fatherhood that have been produced by Hollywood, and are most relevant to Adam Sandler, are the bromance and the animal comedy. Both forms address a particular type of masculinity through a protagonist who shows that he is a ‘good man’ by modeling a positive form of masculinity. This is culturally significant because among Hollywood’s Gen X animal comedians there are clearly two camps: the female-sensitive, that shows women in a positive light and the *pro-masculinist*, that shows women in a negative light;⁶² each is attempting to promote a specific type of masculinity as the most desirable. The Frat Pack⁶³ is a group of male filmmakers who have adopted an adversarial model for their interactions with women, while Sandler and his cohorts have followed a more female-sensitive style. The old

⁶¹ Taylor, 32-33.

⁶² Alilunas, Peter. “Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure: The Frat Pack, Women, and the Trauma of Victimization in the “Dude Flick.” *Academia.edu: Peter Alilunas*. <http://umich.academia.edu/PeterAlilunas>. Accessed 4/5/2013. 1-3.

⁶³ The Frat Pack consists of Will Ferrell, Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, Luke Wilson, Jack Black, Vince Vaughn, and Steve Carrell.

saying, “Behind every great man there is a great woman,” would be Sandler’s underlying theme. Sandler’s camp makes women the heroines and generally they do not treat women disrespectfully or as adversaries unless they are one of the foils such as in *Big Daddy* and *Spanglish*.

There has been very little scholarship regarding Adam Sandler and his generation of filmmaking comedians, and what there is fails to address their work from a mentorship standpoint. The pro-masculinist version of the animal comedy is described fluently by Peter Alilunas, who argues that various masculine roles portrayed in Frat Pack films illustrate “tensions and anxieties regarding the appropriate place for men, and also demonstrate how contemporary cinematic discourses of male masculinity frequently become laden with images of resentment, bitterness, and a perceived victimization.”⁶⁴ He believes that because these men do not feel that they measure up to what women want nothing they do is good enough.⁶⁵ Additionally, Alilunas describes the necessity of the homosocial community where the men escape from the strains of female interaction. It is important to note that in direct opposition to media depictions of successful American masculinity where models are always physically attractive and well-formed, the homosocial group always includes males who are marginalized due to their physical appearances. In this safe space the men are able to embrace feminine characteristics such as empathy and self-evaluation.⁶⁶ Obviously, it is safe partly because the men do not have to

⁶⁴ Alilunas, 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1-3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2.

concern themselves with impressing women. It is a place where they do not have to apologize for bodily functions, where gross is good, and where they can enjoy recess, much like they experienced during their carefree boyhood days. It also becomes a place where they are free to discuss and debate the nature of manhood and masculinity. It is unlikely that any American Gen X male, (outside the confines of fundamentalist religions, who do not generally watch these films), really wants to revert completely to the old models, however American males do want to retain what power they have.

The animal comedy is designed to please the fourteen to twenty-four age group on which the film industry now depends,⁶⁷ and it is most closely related to burlesque, which is considered low comedy. “It relies on pratfalls and other kinds of physical comedy, on broad humor; like a nose-thumbing schoolboy, it attacks respectability and thrives on getting away with as much outrageous conduct as it can.”⁶⁸ The target audience for these movies is young males who have not fully formed their core values concerning manhood and the films depict women as the restrictors of fun.

On the other hand, Sandler uses his film vehicles to show that the middle-class American model of manhood which has been influenced by pro-feminist liberal values, will see the most success in every area of life. The male ideal he represents in every film is heterosexual, but tolerant and sensitive, and most important, he is either attending college or professionally employed. He also goes out of his way to make it

⁶⁷ Turner, 29.

⁶⁸ Vineberg, 3.

look attainable by most males. In Sandler's versions, extended adolescence is caused either by the rejection of masculinity modeled by his film father or by the lack of a masculine role model altogether. For many Gen X filmmakers, the animal comedy is primarily about the homosocial relationship, but for Sandler, the films depict a female-sensitive, heterosexual relationship that takes primacy over the sexual immaturity Sandler's character portrays early on. The evolution of his character is in direct proportion to his desire to "get the girl"⁶⁹ who is successful in her own right. He sees her as his "one and only;" all other women pale in comparison with her, and she is the catalyst for the changes in his behavior which will lead him from immature sexism into mature manhood. Her role cannot be under-estimated, because without her, it appears as if Sandler will continue in his extended adolescence indefinitely.

The bromance is defined by the male/male platonic relationship and the target audience is a slightly older group than the target for animal comedies. In this genre, males have close friends in addition to their love interest, which is most often female. The films' males have chronologically reached adulthood, but are struggling to find success in one or more areas of life and spend time discussing their feelings for each other. According to Timothy Shary, "This is indicative of the changing attitudes about the previously perceived crisis in masculinity," because the films portray "more acceptance of sincere male bonding that had become so conflicted in previous generations."⁷⁰ But if one perceives the Frat Pack message as one of victimization,

⁶⁹ "Getting the girl" is standard terminology and a consistent theme in film writing and production. If the protagonist is female the goal would be for her to "get the guy."

⁷⁰ Shary, xii.

which falls in line with the gender messages of the 1970s (see page 16), then the twenty-first century bromance is representative of the evolution of gains in gender roles that eschews the label of victim.

In Sandler's version of the bromance, his buddy is usually engaged in helping Sandler find his way out of a rut of extended adolescence and into effective manhood. Sandler's immature character always equates this quest with successfully securing his love interest, who is typically a pro-feminist model of womanhood with her own successful career. "Getting the girl" is extremely important in Sandler's version of American masculinity; she is the carrot to keep him focused on maturing into a man who has the qualities she desires. She represents a committed relationship that includes marriage and family, and having her in his life is his compelling reason to change. Henceforth, in this paper she will be known as 'the one and only.'

What makes all of these genres and films significant in relation to American males is the ways in which the new film portrayals of masculinity have challenged current perceptions of behavioral standards for masculine roles of bachelorhood, husbanding, and fatherhood. Sandler especially, has attempted to enlighten his viewers and has encouraged them to think about what it means to be a good man, which he accomplishes by demonstrating what he considers to be positive forms of masculinity. He sometimes achieves this by exemplifying poor behavior and its unfruitful results and then changing his behavior to show positive results. Each film is somewhat different in its approach, but the ultimate goal is to model educated, middle-class success.

FORMATION OF ADAM SANDLER'S MASCULINITY AND CAREER

Natal Family and Childhood

According to scholar Gregory M. Herek, American males develop their identity “through involvement with family, neighborhood, school, and society.”⁷¹ If Herek is correct, Adam Sandler’s experiences of, and ideas about, masculinity were shaped by American cultural trends during the 1970s and 1980s, and by his own family life, as well as through interaction with schoolmates and friends. There are essentially four families in Adam Sandler’s life: childhood, college, comedy club, and marriage; and each helped shape his masculinity. His natal family was white, Jewish, and middle-class, with a professional father and a stay-at-home mom, and Adam was the youngest of four children (two sisters, one brother), born on September 9, 1966. After the family’s move to Manchester, New Hampshire in 1972, the brothers shared a bedroom. The 1970 census reported Manchester’s population as 87,754,⁷² so though it was substantially smaller than New York City, it was still a sizeable community, though it had few people of color. Adam saw himself as the least intelligent of all the siblings and wrote about it in the song “Stan the Man,” a tribute to his father which is heard at the end of *Grown Ups* (see Appendix B).

Sandler biographer Bill Crawford, quotes Adam’s mother who said, “He’s

⁷¹ Gregory M. Herek, “On Heterosexual Masculinity: Some Psychological Consequences of the Social Construction of Gender and Sexuality,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael Kimmel. (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 76.

⁷² U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census. <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

always been funny; he always woke up in a good mood.”⁷³ Extra-curricular activities during his school years included playing basketball at the Manchester Boys Club,⁷⁴ leading various rock bands, and maintaining a grade point average that gained him entry into New York University in September of 1984.

According to Adam, his father was gruff, but loving and attentive, and Adam constantly tried to get him to laugh. When *IGN FilmForce* interviewer Jeff Otto asked if he got his sense of humor from his dad, Sandler stated, “Well, part of my father having a temper led to me developing a sense of humor trying to calm the old man down.”⁷⁵ As scholars Carol and Peter Stearns have noted, “The child learns to deal with emotion... as an observer of parental styles, which he may copy...”⁷⁶ The Stearnses premise implies that Adam was aware of anger management and anger as a male behavior early on. Jeff Otto asked him if he received helpful advice from his family while growing up: Sandler responded that his father led by example and though he wasn’t perfect, he taught his children that, “family is the most important thing. He just made us feel comfortable, and my mother also, just made our family feel comfortable and respectful to other families.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Bill Crawford. *Adam Sandler: America’s Comedian*. (St. Martin’s Griffin: New York, 2000), 11.

⁷⁴ Schuman, 27. Boys and Girls Club of Manchester, Press Release, “Adam Sandler Donates One Million Dollars...” October 24, 2007. In Oct. 2007 he donated one million dollars for renovation and expansion – an indicator of his on-going concern for American youth.
<http://www.mbgcnh.org/Images/Images/capital%20campaign%20kickoff%20press%20release.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Otto, Jeff. Movie Review. “*IGN FilmForce* talks with the often shy comic about playing it more serious in James L. Brooks’ *Spanglish*,” (Dec. 15, 2004). *IGN*.
[www.ign.com/articles/2004/12/16/interview-adam-sandler?page=\(1,2or3\)](http://www.ign.com/articles/2004/12/16/interview-adam-sandler?page=(1,2or3)). Accessed 2/8/2013.

⁷⁶ Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, *Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America’s History*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1986. 219.

⁷⁷ Otto.

At the beginning of films produced by Happy Madison (Sandler's production company) there is a picture of his father who says, "Terrific." *50 First Dates* is dedicated to his dad, with a touching sentiment that is reminiscent of Robert Bly's ideal of the Mythopoetic Father: "My father, my mentor, my teacher, my coach, my idol, my hero, my family's leader, my mom's best friend, and by far, the coolest guy I have ever known." Clearly these are character qualities he learned from his father and which he associates with ideal manhood, and they drive his efforts to influence young males' ideas of manhood, fatherhood, and masculinity.

Sandler once stated, "I grew up in a nice home where it was important to make each other laugh. I have a brother, two sisters, and my parents and grandparents were always around. We used to watch a lot of movies with Jerry Lewis, the Marx Brothers, Abbott and Costello."⁷⁸ Biographer Michael A. Schuman states that two of Adam's favorites were Jewish comedians Mel Brooks and Rodney Dangerfield. "Sandler later said 'My favorite comic, when I was getting into it, was Rodney [Dangerfield] ... I'd walk around my house doing Rodney jokes for my dad, and he would laugh.'⁷⁹ Adam also tried on the lines of the suave Chevy Chase, and underachieving ne'er-do-well Bill Murray. According to Sandler's childhood friend, Kyle McDonough, "We saw *Caddyshack* (1980) maybe twenty times. We memorized all the lines and quoted them all."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Crawford, 4. All examples of the burlesque bromance relationship with inherent homosocial bonds.

⁷⁹ Schuman, 16. Quoting Ben Stiller, "Adam Sandler-comedian-Interview," *Inteviuw*, December 1994, <http://findarticles.com/>. (March 28, 2008).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

Another key contributor to Sandler's comedic upbringing was *Saturday Night Live*, which premiered on October 11, 1975. He later recalled,

I was in, I think, sixth grade when *Saturday Night Live* was the biggest thing. I'm sure the other guys who are my age probably said this too, but my big thing was trying to stay up to watch it. The show was a major part of the life of every one of the kids I grew up with. It was not only topical, because it dealt with current events; it was just like instilled in our heads. "These are the funniest guys of our generation, so whatever they say is funny, is funny."⁸¹

McDonough also remarked,

Adam was the go-to guy, the guy people liked to be around. We had a close group of friends, six or seven guys. We used to love being at his house. We'd play pool, Ping-Pong. His parents were the most down-to-earth people, caring and loving. They incorporated his friends into the family.⁸²

When Adam was seventeen, his older brother, Scott, was in Boston attending law school and going to open-mic nights at comedy clubs. Scott suggested that Adam try stand-up comedy because he thought his younger brother was funny. Adam met with some success, but later, when he asked for Scott's opinion about what he should do with his life, Scott suggested acting. According to Crawford, Adam said that he had always considered his brother to be smarter than he was and so decided to do what he said.⁸³

University and Early Career

At NYU, Adam Sandler was a drama major and took serious acting lessons at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute, but some of the professors doubted his abilities and commitment because he was a clown. His adviser, Mel Gordon, was encouraged

⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

⁸² Ibid., 20.

⁸³ Crawford, 12-13.

by other faculty members to reprimand Sandler, which the man attempted; but Adam did not interpret the message in the way Gordon intended. “I think that disapproval was a great inspiration. Adam had tremendous will and managed to invent a place for himself, so I admire him a lot.”⁸⁴ Sandler first tried his hand at stand-up comedy at seventeen at a Boston comedy club and then nurtured his act by performing regularly at other universities and in clubs while at NYU.⁸⁵ At nineteen, Sandler auditioned for talent coordinator Lucien Hold at the Comic Strip, considered to be the best comedy club in New York. Hold was very impressed, stating that [Sandler] “had all clean stuff – very quirky, very cute. I thought, this guy is really good. The next day I got a phone call from Adam thanking me for being so kind...he had such a pleasant and humble personality...”⁸⁶ Sandler’s evident good manners speak to the way in which he was mentored into adulthood by his parents. During college he landed his first television acting job as Smitty, a high- school friend of Theo Huxtable, on *The Cosby Show* in 1984.⁸⁷

Sandler’s second family grew out of his college days. He graduated from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts in June 1, 1988. During his four years there he became close friends with Frank Coraci, Jack Giarraputo, Judd Apatow, and Tim Herlihy, all of whom became his cohorts in filmmaking⁸⁸ and are still actively involved with Sandler in both personal and professional capacities.

⁸⁴ Crawford, 16.

⁸⁵ *IMDb*, “Biography: Adam Sandler.”

http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001191/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm. Accessed 2/16/2013.

⁸⁶ Schuman, 35.

⁸⁷ *IMDb*. “Adam Sandler,” <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001191/>. Accessed 2/19/2013.

⁸⁸ Note: A number of Sandler’s cohorts often work outside of his purview, especially Apatow, so I use the term cohorts rather than Team Sandler because Team seems to imply a fixed group.

According to Bill Crawford, Adam's college dorm-mates were his chief supporters and helped him write new material. "We would come up with stuff that would make us laugh," Frank Coraci recalled of those early days in New York City. "And he would be really brave and take it up onstage. No one would laugh. Then I'd see him work on it for a few weeks and finally figure out how to make it work."⁸⁹ These men most certainly are involved in a homosocial friendship with Sandler and over the years they have added to their circle. Film scholar Aaron Taylor calls this group Sandler's "usual gang of yes-men (i.e., directors Frank Coraci, Dennis Dugan, and Peter Segal and screenwriters Tim Herlihy, Steve Koren, and Robert Smigel)."⁹⁰ This "gang of yes-men" is one of Sandler's fraternal families; a homosocial network and kinship.⁹¹ What is important is that the casual bond of fraternity, not just blood ties, directs much of Sandler's life; for instance, questioned about why he chose to place *The Wedding Singer* in the 1980s he responded, "Me and my buddies, we had fun in the '80s. That's when we all met."⁹²

After Sandler's short run on *The Cosby Show*, his manager found him an acting job working on MTV, which had been on the air, showing music videos nonstop for six years. MTV had been birthed by Robert Pittman, a twenty-seven-year-old radio programmer from Mississippi, on August 1, 1981. He targeted the Generation Xers who

⁸⁹ Crawford, 21.

⁹⁰ Aaron Taylor, "Adam Sandler, an Apologia: Anger, Arrested Adolescence, Amour Fou" in Shary, page 46.

⁹¹ Sandler's cohorts should not be labeled as "yes-men," because people tend to work with those who are familiar and who bring specific skills to the collaborative process. Additionally, each of them has had numerous successes apart from Adam Sandler, so clearly they are not simply Adam Sandler's "yes-men."

⁹² David Poland. "Q&As: Adam Sandler," Interview from *TNT Online*. <http://adamsandler.jt.org/news/interviews/tntinterview.htm>. Accessed 4/12/2013.

watched TV, did their homework, and listened to music all at the same time. By 1984, MTV enjoyed advertising revenues of a million dollars per week, had an audience of twenty-two million young people twelve to twenty-four years old, and was the highest rated basic cable network.⁹³ “A wash in materialism addicting a new generation to consumerism and celebrity worship, floating in dramatic visual images, hostile to traditional narrative structures, MTV helped set the 1980s cultural template. By the end of the decade, many would consider MTV the era’s ‘most influential single cultural product,’ for better and worse.”⁹⁴ Sandler’s job was hosting one of the channel’s earliest live telecasts during spring break (1989) and his comedy began to be seen by hundreds of thousands of young people in the comfort of their own homes. His spring break success evolved into his appearance on MTV’s game show *Remote Control*, which toured college campuses around the country and allowed Sandler to become a minor celebrity. He then progressed to performing on the *MTV Half-Hour Comedy Hour*.

It would be remiss to neglect the role of television and movies in Adam Sandler’s adolescent formation of masculinity. According to film critic Dustin Rowles, “If you grew up in the ’80s, there’s probably a lot about that decade locked away in the back recesses of your mind. When you think ’80s culture, you think *Dukes of Hazzard*, *The A-Team*, *Knight Rider*, the films of John Hughes, the action pics of Stallone and Schwarzenegger...”⁹⁵ Sandler and his generation of Gen X film

⁹³ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 129.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Dustin Rowles, Movie Review of “The Most Depressing Movie of All Time,” http://www.pajiba.com/film_reviews/the-day-after-review-the-most-depressing-movie-of-all-time.php. Accessed 2/18/2013.

makers probably watched these action-packed shows: shows that displayed a particular type of masculinity: the hero who fought against evil and injustice. At the same time, television fathers were of the gentler, kinder variety. John Walton in *The Waltons*, Howard Cunningham on *Happy Days*, and others acted out traditional husband and fatherhood roles where the husband was clearly the head of the family and the wife looked to him for leadership. Steven Keaton in *Family Ties*, and Bill Cosby as Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show*, acted out husband/father roles with wives who had professional careers outside the home. In the latter, the women were more than equal partners and often the men were left looking a little foolish.

In addition to television sitcoms, Generation X youth were also influenced by America's newsworthy events, sports heroes, movies, and music, as well as movements such as feminism and the popular debate surrounding masculinity. Most of the Frat Pack, and what Sandler biographer Bill Crawford calls Team Sandler, were born during the 1960s. The post-modern era conversation surrounding manhood and masculinity was well developed before their adolescence, and the new definitions of masculinity and manhood were thoroughly entrenched in social jargon by the time they reached their majority in the 1980s. The work of second-wave feminists had evolved to make it socially and politically incorrect to make disrespectful comments to or about women, at least in public.

Because the 1980s was the decade of Sandler's high-school and college years it is valuable to look at some of the pivotal events that took place in America. 1980 was an election year and American voters wanted a strong leader who could infuse the country

with a sense of hope, heroism, and patriotism due to the military and political disasters of the previous decade. The early 1970s political atmosphere had been polluted by the Vietnam War, the scandal of Watergate, and the pardon of Richard Nixon.⁹⁶ During the 1980 presidential election campaign Ronald Reagan “projected his vision of America as an exceptional nation” and reminded citizens that the country had a unique responsibility to “overthrow Communism with its threats to freedom and dignity of humanity.”⁹⁷

Shortly after Reagan’s election, on June 5, 1981, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published their *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. It was the first official report of what would eventually become known as the AIDS epidemic and was reported by the Associated Press and the *Los Angeles Times* the same day and in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on June 6. Immediately, doctors from across the country reported many comparable cases to the CDC. By the end of the year, one hundred twenty-one individuals had died from complications of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus.⁹⁸ As a result, gay-bashing became even more acceptable among mainstream heterosexual Americans whose homophobia was fueled by fear of the illness. It took the infection of white heterosexual Americans, including women, who contracted the virus through blood transfusions, to take the focus off of the homosexual aspect of the transmission. One of the most notable and touching stories of the day was that of Ryan Wayne White, a thirteen-year-old hemophiliac, infected through a blood transfusion, and diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in

⁹⁶ Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum.
<http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/grf/fordbiop.asp>

⁹⁷ Moss, 201.

⁹⁸ “A Timeline of Aids,” *AIDS.gov* (<http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>). Accessed 2/1/2013.

1984. Very little was known about the disease and parents so teachers vigorously protested his return to school and neighbors no longer wanted their children to play with him. His family's fight with the school system, brought media attention, and Ryan became a spokesman for AIDS awareness and research. He died in April of 1990, just before his high school graduation.⁹⁹ Stories like young White's may have made a stronger impression on Sandler and friends than the murder of San Francisco's homosexual mayor, Harvey Milk, later encouraging them to make the movie, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007), in which gay awareness is the central theme. Only after Ronald Reagan's friend, actor Rock Hudson (d.1985), died from the disease did the President pursue the topic with the surgeon general.¹⁰⁰

One of the most notable events of 1982, at least in the life of a middle-class American teen like Sandler who was a budding musician, was Michael Jackson's release of *Thriller*, whom "*Time [Magazine]* declared ... to be the biggest thing since the Beatles."¹⁰¹ Two attention-grabbing female singers of the 1980s were Madonna and Cyndi Lauper (both women dressed with startlingly - for the time - wild clothing, hair-dos, and accessories.). For her efforts, in January 1985 Lauper was named one of the Women of the Year by the feminist magazine, *Ms.* "For taking feminism beyond conformity to individuality, rebellion and freedom."¹⁰² Madonna's song, "Material Girl" celebrated the materialism of the decade and put pressure on males to buy their girls whatever they wanted. These songs changed the way Gen X males saw themselves in

⁹⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Who Was Ryan White?" HIV/AIDS Programs. <http://hab.hrsa.gov/about/hab/ryanwhite.html> Accessed 2.1/2013.

¹⁰⁰ Troy, 255.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 196.

relation to women. In *The Wedding Singer* Sandler's character is left at the altar because his bride was a Material Girl.

According to scholar Gil Troy, the 1980s was a “new Gilded Age, the Greed Decade”¹⁰³ during which consumerism hit an all-time high; the term, “Situational Ethics,” took on a new meaning, and sociologists wrote that there was little ideological or moral traction. Individuals built their identities by how much they spent and judged the success or failure of others in the same light. In the midst of this decade of materialistic gorging, many American adults were in the process of “finding themselves” while their children were deprived of the traditional moorings of family, religion, community, and inherited values.¹⁰⁴ Many more women took on full-time careers, whether out of necessity or a personal desire for fulfillment, leading to the increased problem of after-school care for their school-aged children. There were more divorces than ever before, resulting in more single-parent families, and more men and women living together without marriage, trying to find personal fulfillment and dragging their children along in their wakes. These trends helped set the stage for Sandler to later address the needs of American males who lacked mentorship during their adolescent years.

American men were being well fed by Hollywood and its portrayals of “white male action heroes.” Scholar Susan Jeffords argues that the popular-culture definition of masculinity was defined by Hollywood films during the 1980s.¹⁰⁵ American audiences

¹⁰³ Ibid., 206.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 231.

¹⁰⁵ Jeffords, 12.

wanted to see “spectacular narratives about characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism, and a mythic heroism.”¹⁰⁶ Films such as *First Blood* (1982), *Top Gun* (1986), and *Die Hard* (1988), brought both national and masculine power to American audiences through populist heroes.¹⁰⁷ As film students, Sandler and his college friends likely saw all of the latest releases, and as comedians, they were always on the lookout for new material, which is readily available by paying attention to politicians.

There was one notable exception to the hardbody film revival. The movie, *The Day After*, made for television as a doomsday warning, was first seen on Sunday, November 20, 1983, a little after Sandler turned seventeen. According to the *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*, it was a very graphic film that illustrated the potential for devastation should the nation suffer a nuclear attack. One hundred million people saw it air on November 20, 1983... nearly 50 percent of the American population at the time. “The message that 100 million Americans are left with at the end of *The Day After*? That the Earth will be a giant graveyard. That there is no hope. That mankind is doomed to failure.”¹⁰⁸ It served Reagan’s Cold War rhetoric well. The film brought home the validity of Reagan’s extremely expensive Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), dubbed Star Wars by critics of the program,¹⁰⁹ but probably served to fill adolescent viewers with a sense of futility.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁸ Rowles, Dustin. “The Most Depressing Movie of All Time,” Film Review. http://www.pajiba.com/film_reviews/the-day-after-review-the-most-depressing-movie-of-all-time.php. Accessed 2/18/2013.

¹⁰⁹ Kevin Crowley, “The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI): Star Wars,” *The Cold War Museum*. <http://www.coldwar.org/articles/80s/SDI-StarWars.asp>. Accessed 1/25/2014. SDI was an antimissile

As for all males, the events that took place during the 1980s helped form Adam Sandler's values and his personal style of masculinity. This becomes fully evident in several of Sandler's films that show his character coming of age in the 1980s and feature the music, the styles, and the culture of the decade

Comedy Family

Chris Rock once summed up the comedic growth process in an interview with James Lipton on *Inside the Actor's Studio*,¹¹⁰ calling himself a "son" of comedians Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Sam Kinison, and Eddie Murphy.¹¹¹ Sandler too, modeled his acts after comedic idols, making him a "son" of Dangerfield, Murray, Chase and others. Cosby, on whose show Sandler made his television debut, may also have had a very strong impact on Sandler's masculinity and career partly due to his influence on America as a whole. Cosby began his own animated series, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* which ran on CBS (1972-1985) and always had a lesson on how to get along with others and function in the world. The show was designed as a teaching tool, which he was well qualified for with a Ph.D. in Urban Education. *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), a TV sitcom, dealt with the everyday challenges of family life and fatherhood through comedy. Cosby also authored the bestselling book, *Fatherhood* (1986). Cosby style humor about family and parenting is what Sandler now draws upon in his more mature roles in films such as *Grown Ups*, where he plays a father.

Chris Rock and Adam Sandler began their alliance while performing at

defense system which would destroy enemy missiles in flight. Reagan first proposed it on March 23, 1983, but it prove to be untenable project was abandoned several years later.

¹¹⁰ Thus far, Sandler has refused Lipton's request for an interview on the show.

¹¹¹ "James Lipton Interviews Chris Rock" on *Inside the Actor's Studio*. March 12, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j90dnZDQxQA>. Accessed 4/19/2013.

comedy clubs during their teen years, and furthered the friendship during their years at *Saturday Night Live* as part of the second generation of *SNL* writers and players. Sandler also developed fraternal bonds with Rob Schneider, David Spade and Chris Farley (d. 1997). All have been regular performers in Sandler's films, and their connections are reflected in the bromances shown in Sandler's movies. According to Schuman, "Sandler stated, 'It helped my whole career when I went from a stand-up comedian who would write maybe a couple of jokes a week that I would be excited about to...all of a sudden writing a few skits a week and helping other guys out with their ideas and trying to do jokes for their skits.'"¹¹² The collaborative environment of *Saturday Night Live* helped grow the friendships and the skills needed for Sandler to create successful films. Additionally, due to *SNL*'s structure of having a guest host each week, Sandler met and worked with many well-known actors and actresses that might not ordinarily have been accessible to him so early in his career. He left *Saturday Night Live* in June of 1995; about the experience he said, "I miss the whole energy of doing that show. We were all like brothers and sisters. We've all stayed close. We're all doing different things now, but not a week goes by that I don't talk to two of them."¹¹³

The reason fraternal bonds were easily created between Sandler and his friends as comedy writers, performers, and as producers of movies is that comedians see similar ironies in everyday events and point out the absurdities in life. Scholar Peter

¹¹² Schuman, 44. Quoting Tom Shales and James Andre Miller, *Live From New York* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2002), 367.

¹¹³ Crawford, 45.

Lyman argues that jokes indirectly speak to the emotions and pressures that may disturb normal living, and re-form group cohesion through shared antagonism and purgative laughter.¹¹⁴ Thus, hours spent joking around and laughing together helped fashion friendships that have lasted and can be seen in *Funny People*, which was loosely based on Apatow and Sandler's early years. In it, young comedians who live together delight in topping each other's jokes. The early scenes of Sandler's films often depict the extended adolescence of his bachelor years. Commenting on those years during an interview in 2007 with *Hollywood.com*, he stated, "My single days were disgusting, and I'm glad they're done. I look back on them and apologize to everyone who was involved."¹¹⁵ This is an indication of his maturation and part of his comedic and personal growth process.

Marriage and Fatherhood

Adam Sandler is clearly a family-oriented man, both in regard to his natal family and to his wife and two daughters, which is often made apparent during interviews. For instance, when Jeff Otto of *IGN FilmForce* asked Sandler if the father he played in *Spanglish* (2004) was a hero, his response was very emblematic of his personal values of living in the moment with his family:

No. Honestly, this feels so much like my brother, this character. When we had Thanksgiving, the last image I saw was my brother with his two kids and his wife. It reminded me of *Spanglish*, just the fact that this guy gave me a wave, he said, "Love ya," but he was like, "These are my kids

¹¹⁴ Peter Lyman, "The Fraternal Bond as a Joking Relationship: A Case Study of the Role of Sexist Jokes in Male Group Bonding," in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael Kimmel. (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 150.

¹¹⁵ Interview, *Hollywood.com*. (Dec. 27, 2007) www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ejk6RnUnd5c. Accessed 5/03/2013.

and I want to make sure they have a great day in Florida.” I admire that. That’s how I got to grow up and that’s how I plan on raising my kids.¹¹⁶

In a 2007 *People* magazine interview, when asked how fatherhood has changed his life he replied that, “It has been great. All your priorities change.”¹¹⁷ And while appearing on *The Charlie Rose Show* on June 22, 2011, Sandler revealed a great deal about his ideal of fatherhood. Rose inquired whether he had any dreams or obsessions he wanted to address and the actor replied that he wanted to become more centered and normal at home and work a little less. These interviews both point to Sandler’s maturing manhood and his concept of ideal fatherhood. It can be difficult to reconcile these tender comments with the golf-club-throwing, temper-tantruming, *Happy Gilmore*, but the team Sandler has working with him includes friends he has had for many years¹¹⁸ so it is unlikely that anger is a key component of his off-screen behavior; he exaggerates emotions to create comedy. During an interview with Jordan I. Fox from *The Harvard Crimson*, Sandler acknowledged that when he reads reviews he often sees words such as “sophomoric,” “juvenile,” “moronic,” and “useless.” He went on to say, “Now I realize I didn’t get into this business to have a critic like me. I got into it to get people to laugh.”¹¹⁹ During an interview with David Letterman to promote *Jack and Jill*, on November 11, 2011, Sandler said he “likes to

¹¹⁶ Jeff Otto, Movie Review. “*IGN FilmForce* talks with the often shy comic about playing it more serious in James L. Brooks’ *Spanglish*,” (12/15/2004). [www.ign.com/articles/2004/12/16/interview-adam-sandler?page=\(1,2or3\)](http://www.ign.com/articles/2004/12/16/interview-adam-sandler?page=(1,2or3)). Accessed 2/8/2013.

¹¹⁷ Oliver Jones, “Adam Sandler... Answers Your Questions,” *People* 68:4 (July 23, 2007): 71-72. Academic Search Elite. EBSCOhost. <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20061437,00.html>. Accessed 1/22/2013.

¹¹⁸ “Adam Sandler Biography,” <http://movies.yahoo.com/person/adam-sandler/biography.html>. Accessed 4/12/2013.

¹¹⁹ Jordan I. Fox, “A Soul-Searching Interview with Adam Sandler,” *The Harvard Crimson*, November 9, 2000. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2000/11/9/a-soul-searching-interview-with-adam-sandler/>. Accessed 4/12/2013.

think that [making people laugh] is why God put him on this planet.”¹²⁰

What makes the formation of Adam Sandler’s masculinity through his family, friendships, and his married life important are the movies that he generates which have an effect on young males. Their importance in the formation of American masculinity models through theater attendance, video sales, and television showings cannot accurately be measured, however they can be summed up by a quote from Judd Apatow when he told Conan O’Brien that “I would bet that more people are watching *Animal House* tonight than are watching *Gandhi*.”¹²¹ Obviously, the larger the audience, the larger Sandler’s impact. While interviewing him in July 2007 about *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, David Letterman commented that the film’s provocative title will help make it enormously successful and that it was a fascinating sociological comedy. To this Sandler replied, “Yeah, everything I do is.”¹²² Social commentary and mentoring, especially regarding masculinity and manhood, are his ulterior motives, beyond the money and the fame, but he usually does it through humor.

Sandler’s white middle-class upbringing afforded him the opportunities of a consistent family life and a college education, where he began creating homosocial bonds that are still an important part of his life. His father took an active role in Adam’s upbringing, mentoring his son into manhood, but he is also a “son” of his

¹²⁰Otto, 3.

¹²¹*Serious Jibber Jabber with Conan O’Brien*. “Comedy Mastermind Judd Apatow.” Televised November 20, 2012. Team COCO. <http://teamcoco.com/video/serious-jibber-jabber-02-judd-apatow>. Accessed 4/6/2012.

¹²²*Late Night with David Letterman*. Interview with Adam Sandler re: *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, Week of July 20, 2007. Accessed 3/29/2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmykCRZpMNk>.

comedy heroes. Tolerance is part of his personal background, and part of the national conversation on LGBT issues, both of which have impacted his use of LGBT characters in his filmmaking. He uses all of these things as he attempts to teach audiences about various aspects of manhood and masculinity, while portraying characters that are consistently heterosexual.

AN OVERVIEW OF SANDLER'S LESSONS IN MASCULINITY

Film scholar Graeme Turner states in *Film as Social Practice*, “Popular films have a life beyond their theatrical runs or their re-runs on television: stars, genres, key movies become part of our personal and shared culture, our identity. Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience: in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself.”¹²³ Changes in academia have caused most of today’s filmmakers to be more highly and broadly educated than their predecessors, and Turner argues that due to the variety of disciplines now included in film studies, most movies are intended to have some societal impact. While this is obvious for historical blockbusters such as *Schindler’s List*, it also holds true for those in which Sandler stars. Turner believes that all professional filmmakers intend to create a product which stands for something,¹²⁴ and Sandler and his filmmaking friends consistently claim this as their goal.¹²⁵

Sandler comedies are successful at the box office because the audience leaves feeling entertained, knowing that all has worked out for the best (see Appendix C). This matters to viewers because, according to Turner, we see ourselves in the film characters, but not only lead characters; we also identify with minor characters at different places in the narrative. “We understand them through our experience of

¹²³ G. Turner, 4.

¹²⁴ G. Turner, 61.

¹²⁵ Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, Part 14, 2011. Turner Classic Movies. Also, *Late Night with David Letterman*. Interview with Adam Sandler: *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, Week of July 20, 2007. Accessed 3/29/2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmykCRZpMNk>.

them in other films or by way of constructing analogies between the film's society and our own."¹²⁶ The film becomes a reflection of our world and ourselves.¹²⁷

In Sandler's work there are several masculine roles that are portrayed over and over: the bully, the sensitive guy, the man-child, the successful professional, the homosexual, the 'regular guy,' the bread-winner, the jock, and the over-sexed adolescent male. In the end the bullies are all vanquished; the sensitive guy stands up for himself; the man-child takes on responsibility; justice prevails and Sandler usually gets the girl. Generally speaking, the story consists of Sandler's resolving his problems and becoming the traditional, responsible, middle-class family man, and he maintains that role with the help of his love- interest/wife.

There are recurring messages and themes that Sandler and his cohorts use to attempt to educate the masses: the value of a college education; the value of a good woman; female-sensitive/pro-family values, including engaged fatherhood; and that morally correct values and choices will overcome evil. The review of some of these key characterizations is important in understanding that Sandler has a motive in his filmmaking: to impart the values his father imparted to him, in his mentorship of American males but not only American because his films are distributed to international audiences as well.

Key Masculine Role: The Bully

School yard killings of the mid-1990s generated widespread public concern and produced three major studies, all of which revealed that "most of the school yard

¹²⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 152.

killers had been victims of bullying and teasing.”¹²⁸ In fact, killing on school property has been common-place since the 1800s, but the new studies brought the development of anti-bullying programs directed at school-aged children, and it encouraged filmmakers to undertake the problem as well. According to Michael Kimmel, “The bully is the least secure about his manhood, and so he is constantly trying to prove it.. But he ‘proves’ it by choosing opponents he is absolutely certain he can defeat.”¹²⁹

Sandler’s characters, Billy Madison, Bobby Boucher (*The Waterboy*), and Zohan, all aim to save the ‘good people’ from the ‘bad guys’ who are bullying them. In several films Sandler shows abuse of power by males in authority (i.e., *Happy Gilmore*, *Anger Management*, *The Longest Yard*, *Click*, *Bedtime Stories*). In others films Sandler shows bullies as hyper-masculine jocks (i.e., *The Waterboy*, *Mr. Deeds*, *50 First Dates*). He does this in order to highlight what scholar Kenneth P. Nunn cites as the problem of disparity between the consequences of bullying behavior in professional sports (where athletes receive a suspension or fine and a ‘boys will be boys’ shrug), as compared to the penalties for juvenile delinquents who receive incarceration.¹³⁰ Arguments such as Nunn’s may play a part in motivating Sandler’s handling of bullies, but in Sandler’s make-believe world, bullies get their just rewards, with plenty of humiliation thrown in for laughs. This outcome is pleasing to

¹²⁸ Miedzian, liii.

¹²⁹ Kimmel “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *Theorizing Masculinities*. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1994), 128.

¹³⁰ Kenneth P. Nunn. “Bullying,” *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*. 46:4 (April 2010), 140-141.

an audience, who have all fallen victim at one time or another, but it also attempts to teach young men that bullying is a negative form of masculine behavior and does not help achieve successful manhood. Sandler's films consistently join the global conversation surrounding the various forms of bullying that are endemic in society, but they do so by showing the bullies' weaknesses and having them receive their comeuppance.¹³¹

Key Masculine Role: The Extended Adolescent

Film scholar Aaron Taylor argues that Sandler's comedies revolve around the tension that exists between bizarre behavior and social conformity, and states that most of Sandler's "comedies are ideologically conservative in form, featuring a social misfit who gradually comes to recognize the necessity of adopting the hegemonic cultural norms that he initially spurned,"¹³² meaning middle-class, patriarchal standards. Taylor's argument of "a social misfit" holds true in nine of Sandler's twenty-five films evaluated for this thesis. In the vast majority of his films he has held onto adolescent immaturity simply because he sees no compelling reason to mature further. This is a fairly common comedy theme used by such greats as Bob Hope, Jerry Lewis, and Jack Lemmon, so clearly Sandler has chosen to follow a time tested formula for success.

Taylor also claims that "The apparent problem of this charismatic yet untenable boyishness is endemic to any profitable discussion of our present so-called

¹³¹ Sandler's films are circulated in a global market. Approximately thirty-eight percent of theater receipts come from over-seas markets. Because bullying is discussed in virtually all cultures, this makes it a global discussion.

¹³² Ibid.

crisis in masculinity,¹³³ and maintains that there is a difference between Sandler's films and other animal comedies. Sandler's films trace the man-child's growth from immaturity to responsible adulthood, which then makes him a respectable love interest for 'the one and only;' in other words, he has a compelling reason to change. Taylor states that the formula works well in pleasing female and male audience members. He also notes that Sandler's characters are responsive to patriarchal authority, and he uses mentor figures to help ease his socialization process. His maturation leads his character to take on normative and often traditional models of manhood and fatherhood,¹³⁴ and his mature characters are always female-sensitive, especially when it comes to wives and daughters.

Nearly all of Sandler's work reflects the idea that women are sex objects, reiterating a *Playboy* model of bachelorhood, until he meets 'the one and only;' then his character develops a new respect for women and he increasingly conforms to a female-sensitive form of manhood. Until he meets 'her,' Sandler's man-children generally have failed to form a stable masculine identity and are trapped in an extended adolescence. *Billy Madison*, *Happy Gilmore*, *Big Daddy*, *Eight Crazy Nights*, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, *Just Go With It*, and *That's My Boy* all have Sandler stuck in what is known as role confusion.¹³⁵ They have failed to reach manhood though they are well past the age of adolescence. Aaron Taylor

¹³³ Ibid., 24.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹³⁵ Erik Erikson's Psycho-social Stages of Adolescent and Adulthood Theory: For Erikson, adolescence embodies the assimilation and aggregation of the prior crises of childhood into a suitable identity. It is a time when teens must determine what they believe in, their values; how they may be similar to or different from peers and parents; essentially trying to define who they really are. See Pastorino and Doyle-Portillo, 453.

believes that Sandler's helplessness, consistently inappropriate behaviors, excessive childishness, outbursts of hostility, and romantic clumsiness are symptomatic of men who do not want to take up their responsibilities, and for the sake of humor, and perhaps to accentuate his point, Sandler takes them to extremes. His characters often suggest that his awkward boyhood is simply a type of paralysis and an aspect of fear.¹³⁶ In some films this is due to a traumatic event during childhood such as the loss of one or both parents. In fact, the loss of parent(s) in *Billy Madison*, *Happy Gilmore*, *The Waterboy*, and *Eight Crazy Nights* is a commentary on grief, rites of passage and a lack of mentoring akin to the concerns of the Mythopoetic Movement. In all of these films, Sandler's character has become trapped at some level of immaturity which defines all of his relationships, and hampers his ability to be a self-sufficient adult. As he portrays these man-children who have an inability to adopt social norms, he simultaneously uses various stunts and character deficiencies to reveal the incongruous status of the many man-boys who are trapped in childhood.¹³⁷ Through these portrayals Sandler validates Robert Bly's mythopoetic *Iron John* theories that adolescent boys need a rite of passage in order to successfully reach manhood.¹³⁸

Sandler's funny movies usually employ adolescent humor, meaning: insults, drunkenness, bodily functions, foul language, and challenging another male's masculinity. His sweet-natured fool conceals an explosive rage that erupts at times of

¹³⁶ Aaron Taylor, 24, in Shary.

¹³⁷ Shary, 21.

¹³⁸ Trent Watts, "Iron John: A Book About Men," in Carroll, 241-242.

frustration.¹³⁹ These overt displays of anger – temper tantrums – are considered unacceptable in mature males and they reveal a lack of self-control, and an emotional imbalance which are also considered detrimental to one’s physical health, according to scholars Carol Z. and Peter N. Stearns.¹⁴⁰ But why does Sandler portray these so consistently and well? In an interview with *Entertainment Tonight Online (ETOL)* regarding where the idea for *The Waterboy* had come from Sandler answers the question:

Was I a goof ball? Was I abused? I don’t know. On occasion I guess I was. On occasion I was a jerk too. I was right down the middle. I always enjoy writing about guys who got abused and picked on and then fight back... Oh, yeah, everyone’s been through humiliation in front of a lot of people; gotten messed [with] by somebody; when you don’t fight back and you feel stupid or you walk away. I remember lying in my bed after getting some crap in school and feeling like, “Why didn’t I fight that guy?” Your heart hurts the whole night. And then the next day you’re fighting back in places where it’s not making sense ’cause you feel bad that you didn’t do it the day before.¹⁴¹

This comment fits the model of a sensitive male whose “heart hurts” and who “feels bad;” but there always comes a point where his character will not tolerate any more abuse and finally loses his cool. His anger (or angst in a few cases) is displayed in a screaming fit designed to intimidate his opponent into submission; a war of violent words, and sometimes actions, often ensues, but he never physically abuses women. Usually this is a turning point in the story, the place where Sandler’s character makes the change. These films associate “true manhood” with commitment to others and

¹³⁹ Shary, 21.

¹⁴⁰ Stearns, *Anger*, 227.

¹⁴¹ “The Adam Sandler Experience,” taken from Entertainment Tonight. *SNL.jt.ORG*. October 20, 1998. <http://adamsandler.jt.org/news/interviews/interviewwaterboyet.html>.

with self-confidence. Through each film's evolution Sandler learns to appreciate a fully developed concept of womanhood; in other words he accepts that the girl has a professional career, deserves his respect, and that he must change his immature behavior. Thirteen of his films fall into this category.

What Sandler's comedic movies attempt to communicate to audience members about masculinity is that it is okay to be weak, lazy, and self-indulgent to a point, but when the well-being of others is at stake it is time to "man-up." And that manning-up is where Sandler's characters (and Sandler hopes, some of the weak, lazy, self-indulgent, substance-abusing, adolescent males watching) embrace their masculinity, form a healthy romantic relationship, and achieve manhood. According to Myriam Miedzian, who rejects violent and aggressive forms of masculinity, "We desperately need new heroes and new myths for our boys – heroes whose sense of adventure, courage, and strength are linked with caring, empathy, and altruism."¹⁴² Sandler may well be that hero in his own inimitable way.

As stated earlier, Taylor believes that the weakening of traditional masculine roles has evoked a profound sense of being lost among a substantial portion of Western men, particularly those who are older, under-educated, or working-class.¹⁴³ Realistically this is true for all men at various times in their lives, but it began to be openly discussed as the Men's Movement evolved in the 1970s and 1980s. American culture sets high standards for perfection in virtually every area of a person's life - physical, financial, intellectual; it is impossible to excel in every area. Media images

¹⁴² Miedzian, 293.

¹⁴³ Shary, 25.

are unrealistic and may lead to a feeling of futility or failure. Sandler seeks to address this futility and clinging to adolescent attitudes in every film. His visage and physique are average; his character always has some flaw or weakness that he is working to overcome; he never portrays super-masculine qualities, and because of these things, his model of masculinity looks to be attainable by the average American male.

Key Themes: Heterosexual Engagement With Homosexuality

There were many societal influences impacting Adam Sandler's understanding of gender during his formative years, including the debate over the rights of homosexuals (LGBT). Conservatives fought vehemently for the heterosexual, two-parent, nuclear family, but unsurprisingly, liberals did not remain silent. Aaron Taylor calls attention to the importance that second-wave feminism's influence has had on the acceptance of LGBT culture and the effects this has had on movie portrayals of traditional patriarchal concepts of masculinity that are displayed on screen.¹⁴⁴

Other pop-culture phenomena also had an important impact; Michael Jackson's 1982 release of *Thriller*, which sold forty million copies and was the fastest selling album ever, was also an important influence on GenX masculinity. Jackson's physiognomy and unusual persona seemed to blur both racial and gender lines and helped legitimize the behavior of cross-dressing performers such as Boy George, whose song, "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?" (1982) was performed in Sandler's

¹⁴⁴ Taylor, 40.

The Wedding Singer (1998) by transsexual Alexis Arquette (formerly Robert Arquette). This type of behavior was not usually seen in mainstream society, but it served to shed light on the LGBT issues of masculinity in a new way. Featuring “Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?” at a wedding reception added a note of perverse humor to the film, and sung by any mediocre singer it could have created a laugh. But Sandler’s inclusion of Arquette as an LGBT representative makes an overt statement of support for those who are marginalized by their trans- or homosexuality and suggests Sandler’s commitment to help viewers broaden their thinking about what constitutes ‘normative masculinity.’

Scholar Gregory M. Herek argues that heterosexual masculinity is partially constructed by differentiating it from the feminine and from the homosexual. For many years many Americans viewed homosexuality as feminized, in other words men who are homosexuals are like women; ‘real men’ had to perform different sets of masculine behaviors. According to Herek, this makes establishing their manhood important to heterosexual men because of the negative connotation of being gay, and has led him to argue that homophobia is a vital part of heterosexual masculinity in order to establish “who one is not.”¹⁴⁵ In Sandler’s films however, there are numerous transvestites, transsexuals, and homosexuals with whom his character interacts respectfully. Homophobic comments and slurs used to goad another man into ‘manly’ action, appear only as foils during Sandler’s adolescent periods. This seems to echo the behavior of Americans today where there is a growing message of

¹⁴⁵Herek, 76.

tolerance, at least in public, but with one's male friends it may still be considered cool to call each other "fag" or "gay" as the ultimate put-down.¹⁴⁶ Sandler's publicly stated message is that people should be allowed to be who they really are and not forced into a particular model,¹⁴⁷ and the manner in which Sandler's characters interact with LGBT characters calls attention to the fact that there is no conclusive definition for what constitutes 'masculine' behavior. Sandler's film characters usually trace the growth of a man-child into a responsible form of masculinity, which also means accepting LGBT people, yet his characters' homosocial friendships always emphasize his heterosexuality.

Key Characterizations: 'the one and only'

Sandler's films almost always end with the guy "getting the girl" and attaining conventional middle-class manhood and domesticity. The reason for that, according to film scholar Graeme Turner, is that "audiences expect to encounter a plot, centered around a main character, played by a star, driven by a consistent set of cause and effect relationships; employing a double-plot structure which links a heterosexual romance with another sphere of action; and which uses the romantic clinch as the sign of narrative closure."¹⁴⁸ In other words, Sandler's model of romantic/screwball comedy is the long-standing favorite of American audiences, and they have expectations. The plot begins with a hero and a heroine who are in opposition to each other: through a series of events, which always become tests of

¹⁴⁶ Lyman, 156.

¹⁴⁷ *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry* – Adam Sandler and Kevin James Interview. *Movieweb.com*, (no date). <http://www.movieweb.com/movie/i-now-pronounce-you-chuck-and-larry/adam-sandler-and-kevin-james-interview>. Accessed 4/26/2013.

¹⁴⁸ G. Turner, 113-114.

Sandler's character, they unite as a romantically involved couple.¹⁴⁹ The viewers *want* Sandler to get the girl because audiences love a “happily ever after,” even if it is fictional, but Sandler uses this theme to rearticulate his version of female-sensitive, middle-class manhood.

Not just any girl will do for Sandler's character to turn from his life of immaturity: it must be ‘the one and only.’ She represents Sandler's male extended-adolescent opposite – a mature, educated, successful woman who is not interested in his buffoonish and childish behavior. Inevitably, she demands that he take responsibility for his actions and begin to behave maturely. She is his catalyst for embracing maturity. If he truly wants to have a relationship with her he must show commitment to achieving his own success first, and then he must make a commitment to their monogamous relationship. Once again, this leads Sandler to present his standards of appropriate middle-class behavior to the audience. Her female presence, in relation to Sandler's character, calls attention to his heterosexual masculinity.

Her presence also secures the “Happily Ever After” ending that American movie watchers want to see. ‘The one and only’ appears in *Billy Madison*, *Happy Gilmore*, *The Waterboy*, *Big Daddy*, *Eight Crazy Nights*, *50 First Dates*, *Chuck and Larry*, *Bedtime Stories*, *You Don't Mess With the Zohan*, *Punch-drunk Love*, *Reign Over Me*, and *Just Go With It*, in order to call Sandler's character into a new level of maturity. Whether she is working with the golf-club-throwing Happy Gilmore or turning him from a life of serial dating in *Just Go With It*, her role is to help him

¹⁴⁹ Vineberg, 3.

recognize the traditional, responsible, middle-class American standard of heterosexual manhood. ‘The one and only’ also appears in *The Wedding Singer*, *Little Nicky*, *Grown Ups*, *Anger Management*, and *Click*, albeit with a somewhat modified function. In these films, Sandler’s character displays naïvity and a frustrated maturity so she is there to help him recognize his own potential and bring about his growth into a reasonable representation of middle-class manhood. In *Mr. Deeds*, she is there so that he can help her to mature into his ideal of a good woman; in *Spanglish*, to show him that he really wants a traditional housewife – or at least a wife who brings peace into his life. Her role is always to contribute to the development and/or healing of Sandler’s adult male character.

Scholar Aaron Taylor asserts that Sandler’s persona has been more affected by second-wave feminism than by his interaction with gays, and states that “Men must reconcile an old-style machismo with new demands for emotional expressivity and intimacy.”¹⁵⁰ There is no doubt that second-wave feminism has impacted Sandler’s views, but gays have had more acceptance in the art community for a longer period of time, so the two may have worked hand in hand to mold his opinions. In any case, after Sandler finds ‘the one and only,’ his matured characters do not fear being sensitive nor do they fear appearing feminized.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Shary, 40.

¹⁵¹ One event that the early Gen X’ers were probably unaware of at the time inaugurated a campaign to save Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender people from harassment and marginalization. The first Gay Pride march was held in New York City on June 28, 1970, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. A colorful and rather lengthy segment in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* shows a LGBT celebration after a Gay Pride March. The movie’s whole focus was to point out homophobia and the hypocrisy of non-gays, as well as the needless rigidity of government rules. Taylor, 40 .

For Sandler's characters, masculinity is defined in reciprocation with female roles and/or through homosocial interactions. The male ideal is traditional and heterosexual, but is tolerant of other people's choices. Women, as well as fatherhood, have maturing influences on Sandler's men, and he advocates a companionate form of marriage, but one with conservative leanings. This sometimes proves challenging because Sandler's on-screen love interests all tend to be educated, empowered, strong women who have shunned victimization and the artificial classifications of identity, gender, and sexuality.¹⁵²

Key Characterizations: Family and Fatherhood

Sandler's relationship with his father was intrinsic to the formation of his own masculinity and his mentorship of American males is a valiant attempt to emulate that. His portrayals usually depict his ideal of being a "real man" and this means being a good provider, a kind, faithful husband, and an engaged father. According to Sandler (and nearly everyone else), poor, lazy, or absent parenting retards masculine growth, and his character shows this to be the case in the films *Billy Madison*, *Happy Gilmore*, *Bulletproof*, *The Waterboy*, *Eight Crazy Nights*, and *That's My Boy*. Conversely, he displays healthy masculinity due to good parenting in *Bedtime Stories* and eventually in *Big Daddy*. In all of these films parenting, or the lack thereof, demonstrates that mature fathering needs to involve discipline.

In Sandler's idealized version of manhood and family, the family consists of a heterosexual couple who are involved in the lives of their children, and the father

¹⁵² Rampton, 2-3.

leads by example. Some of his recent films cast Sandler in the role of the chief breadwinner, but in every case, he consistently promotes his version of female-sensitive/*pro-family values*. According to scholar Stevi Jackson, “What we think of as ‘a family’ is a complex set of relationships and practices all of which can vary: there are many differences in kinship...”¹⁵³ Traditionally, family meant a male father, female mother, and their offspring. However, after the turbulent 1960s and feminists’ demand for changes, the new descriptors were more accurate and inclusive. For the purpose of this thesis, then, family will be broadly defined as a closely knit group of people who care deeply for each other and are committed to the welfare of each individual and the group as a whole; and it may include fictive kinships¹⁵⁴ such as Sandler’s college and comedy friends. Based on the particular storyline, Sandler uses both the traditional and the more inclusive models in his films.

Female-sensitive/*pro-family values* are clearly important to Sandler in his choice of roles, though the families sometimes appear a bit dysfunctional. So far, fifteen out of Sandler’s twenty-six films foreground issues of family dynamics. *Billy Madison*, *Big Daddy*, *50 First Dates*, *Click*, and *Hotel Transylvania* all expose the tension between a traditional father and his adult child. In *Happy Gilmore*, Sandler’s character is trying to protect his grandmother, and in *Reign Over Me* his character’s

¹⁵³ Stevi Jackson, “Families, Domesticity and Intimacy,” in *Introducing Gender and Women’s Studies*, ed. Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson. (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 128.

¹⁵⁴ The term ‘fictive kinship’ has been used for many years by anthropologists and ethnologists who have recently revised the terminology to ‘nurture kinship,’ which may be based on shared economic ties, shared residences, or through other interactions. These kinships are often formed to supplement or replace family relationships. In American immigrant history they have frequently been centered around culture and language, but have also flourished around occupation, such as factory workers and firemen.

in-laws are trying to protect and help him. *Bedtime Stories* and *Jack and Jill* show extreme tension between siblings; and *Spanglish*, *That's My Boy*, and *Just Go With It* reveal families that are broken because one parent is tremendously dysfunctional and is the main source of damage to the children.

Perhaps most interesting from the standpoint of family and gender analysis, are the films depicting fictive kinship networks and fraternal bonds. Fictive kinship networks are groups that have bonded together closely enough to become substitute families, much like Sandler and his college buddies. This is portrayed in *Mr. Deeds* through the small town pizza parlor patrons; in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, through the fire station and within the LGBT community; and in *Grown Ups*, through the reunited teammates from days gone by. Sandler's unstated message is that close homosocial friendships – fictive kinships - are important to men.

The style of parenting that runs throughout Sandler's films is permissiveness, sometimes extreme permissiveness, where the children's behavior borders on being anti-social.¹⁵⁵ *Billy Madison*, *Grown Ups*, and *Just Go With It* all contain portrayals of this family dynamic – as opposed to the more disciplined “children are to be seen and not heard” model of childrearing from earlier generations.¹⁵⁶ In *Billy Madison* the implied message is that making a child's life too easy does not build an emotionally healthy or successful adult. In *Grown Ups*, both Sandler and Kevin James portray very permissive parents, who ignore rude and defiant behavior by their

¹⁵⁵ Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*. (New York: New York University, 2003), 70.

¹⁵⁶ Lisa Hammel, “Dr. Spock as a Father – No Mollycoddler,” in *The New York Times on the Web*, Nov. 8, 1968.

offspring. Sandler is very sensitive to small things that upset his young daughter, hugs his son and tells the boy that he loves him, and consoles his wife with the comment that “Parents make mistakes.” These portrayals express the late twentieth-century model of American parenting that seeks to negotiate with children.

Scholar Peter Stearns attributes permissiveness to the American conversation surrounding child discipline and scholastic achievement. He states that “Negotiation, more than punishment, now [lies] at the center of socialization, given the need to deal with attitude and motivation, and not just behavior.”¹⁵⁷ According to family historian Jessica Weiss, “Commentators have attributed the ‘new’ 1990s father, active in his children’s nurture and care, to the 1970s feminist critiques of gender roles and family dynamics and the increasing participation of married women and mothers in the labor force.”¹⁵⁸ Weiss, however, argues that the shift actually predated second-wave feminism and states that baby-boom era families struggled with the notions of what men should be doing as compared to what they actually were doing while they tried to establish careers. However, through the struggle, post-war couples shaped important emotional space for men in family life and laid a new foundation for father involvement. By the 1980s, it was apparent to sociologists and mental health professionals that the absence of fathers had created problems for men, their wives, and their children. This helped lead men’s movements to renew the focus on fathering.¹⁵⁹ In fact, as both parents increasingly spent the majority of their time in

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵⁸ Jessica Weiss, in *A Shared Experience*, ed. McCall and Yacovone, 349 -350.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 112-113.

the workplace, they gave in to the temptation to be more permissive in an attempt to placate mixed feelings about leaving their children in the care of others. Both negotiation and guilt worked together to alter parenting techniques that are still in use, but are not terribly successful. Of course, if they worked to create well-adjusted young men there would be little appeal or need for the extended adolescence film.

Key Themes: College Education

Education, specifically college education, comes up repeatedly in the films Sandler stars in, beginning with *Billy Madison*. Billy is a ne'er-do-well rich "kid" whose father bought his way through school so Billy could graduate with his friends. Because Billy is now an adult, he is able to speed through school and actually graduate. When his father offers to let him take over the company Billy declines and declares that he is going to college; Bobby Boucher (*The Waterboy*) also intends to finish college. In *Big Daddy*, Sandler's character is not only a college graduate, but also has a law degree; in *50 First Dates*, Sandler plays a veterinarian; in *Click* he is an architect; in *Reign Over Me* a dentist; in *Just Go With It* a plastic surgeon; and in *Funny People*, *Grown Ups*, and *Jack & Jill* he is a highly successful businessman who appears educated well beyond high school. Clearly, through these roles Sandler and his cohorts, who nearly all have college degrees, are attempting to encourage their audience to pursue higher education so that they will be better positioned for successful careers.

But from what source did the importance of a college education spring and why does Sandler see it as important for his audience? The short answer is that

American tradition, the conservative northeastern community where Sandler grew up, and Jewish descent all played a part in his valuing college education. In Jewish tradition, intellectual attainment is a marker of masculine identity. Jewish Americans have significantly higher levels of educational attainment than the rest of the population. According to a recent survey by The Pew Forum, fifty-eight percent of Jews are college graduates compared to twenty-nine percent of U.S. adults.¹⁶⁰ Scholars Lane A. Glenn and Suzanne Van Wert found that “Nationwide, only sixty-five percent of American males graduate from high school.”¹⁶¹ According to scholar Daniel A. Clark, in America’s early days few men had formal education beyond the most basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, but the Industrial Revolution, based in the northeast, transformed commerce in America. The concept of a college education gained new meaning for middle-class men and seekers of its “notions of power, authority, advancement, and manhood.”¹⁶²

One of the primary conduits for selling the value of college came from popular culture magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* that sold the idea through articles, interviews with corporate leaders, and through the pictorial images in advertising. “By the 1920s, going to college and the ideal of the college-educated

¹⁶⁰ “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” at *Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project* (Oct. 1, 2013) <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>. Accessed 3/15/2014.

¹⁶¹ Lane A. Glenn and Suzanne Van Wert, “Failure to Launch: Confronting the Male College Student Achievement Gap,” in *The New England Journal of Higher Education* 24:3 (Winter 2010), 14-16. web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.csustan.edu:2048/ehost/pdfviewer/vid=12&sod=6d01e128-355-404c-6960-d07001a59181%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4112. Accessed 3/12/2014.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 30.

business executive had become firmly implanted in American culture;”¹⁶³ at the time, this mainly meant white, middle-class males. Family historian Anya Jabour states that “The upheavals of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War challenged men’s ability to provide for their families, but the events reinforced, rather than eliminated, the ideal of the male breadwinner,” which is a traditional form of masculinity.¹⁶⁴ The 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, commonly referred to as the G.I. Bill, provided a monthly stipend while the veteran attended high-school, college, or a vocational institute. “The end of World War II brought a flood of returning veterans to America’s colleges and universities, with veterans accounting for about seventy percent of all male enrollment in the years after V-J Day.”¹⁶⁵ This was Adam’s father’s generation of men.

According to Clark, there are still serious contemporary concerns about the importance of a college degree when it comes to power in American’s political, economic, and social well-being, but college was the expectation in the Sandler family and its success has proven true.

Key Themes: Body Image

According to Marc E. Mishkind and his fellow researchers, American popular culture constantly puts before its audiences the perfect body; “advertisements

¹⁶³ Ibid., 183.

¹⁶⁴ Anya Jabour, “Marriage,” in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*. Bret E. Carroll, ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2003), 289.

¹⁶⁵ John Bound and Sarah Turner, “Going to War and Going to College: Did World War II and the G.I. Bill Increase Attainment for Returning Veterans?” in *Journal of Labor Economics* 20:4 (Oct. 2002), 785. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.csustan.edu:2048/> Accessed 3/12/2014.

celebrate the young, lean, muscular male body.”¹⁶⁶ The preoccupation with male body image in recent years and the attempt to attain an idealized image has resulted in what Mishkind and others label as the *muscular mesomorph* body type, also labeled by Susan Jeffords as ‘hardbody.’ It is considered the ideal because it is tied to cultural views of masculinity and the male sex role, which proposes that “men be powerful, strong, efficacious – even domineering and destructive,”¹⁶⁷ and began being re-emphasized in media images during the Reagan years.

Mark Mishkind suggests that the declining stigmatization of homosexuals as ‘failed men’ and “the replacement of the old stereotype of the limp-wristed ‘sissy’ with the new stereotype gay, macho, body-builder has increased men’s overall concerns with body image.”¹⁶⁸ Sandler’s *50 First Dates* echoes what is happening in society, but confronts it with antagonistic humor. In the film, Lucy’s steroid-using, body-building, lisping brother, Doug (Sean Astin) is groped by Sandler’s unusual assistant, and then is seen sitting cozily next to him/her at the wedding, is an excellent presentation of this trend. Doug’s aggression, mood swings, and wet dreams, are consistent with the problems reported with steroid use and he dresses to show off his muscles. Astin’s character was conceived during the ongoing controversy of anabolic

¹⁶⁶ Marc E. Mishkind, et al. “The Embodiment of Masculinity: Cultural, Psychological, and Behavioral Dimensions,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael Kimmel. (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 37.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶⁸ Kimmel. “Introduction,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, 16.

steroid use by American youth and professional athletes.¹⁶⁹ “The status of testosterone as ‘the male sex hormone,’ a kind of concentrated essence of masculinity, enhances the transformative power attributed to steroids.”¹⁷⁰ The use of the drugs may appeal to males as a shortcut to achieving masculine traits and thus arriving at manhood. According to scholar Helen Keane, more than one third of users polled revealed that “they were fifteen or younger when they first used steroids and many users reported appearance, rather than performance, as their reason for taking the drugs.”¹⁷¹ Keane argues that there are two frameworks for understanding steroid use; the first considers steroids to be an illicit drug labeling the user as antisocial and excessively masculine, and therefore possibly unpredictable and dangerous. The second framework considers steroid use to be a body image disorder, akin to anorexia in women, thus viewing the user “as a damaged and feminized male, a vivid example of masculinity in crisis,”¹⁷² or as one Harvard team discovered, users feel that they are ‘not real men.’ Doug (Sean Astin) is a parody of Reagan era *Hard-body* hyper-masculine mentality but this may well be Sandler’s signature statement against steroid use in his mission to mentor American males.

According to Aaron Taylor, “Sandler’s emerging popularity in the mid-1990s coincided with the declining commercial fortunes of hyper-masculine stars such as

¹⁶⁹ Steroids are forms of synthetic or natural testosterone and are on the Schedule III list of the Controlled Substances Act, which also contains amphetamines, codeine, morphine, and opium-based compounds.

¹⁷⁰ Helen Keane, “Diagnosing the Male Steroid User: Drug Use, Body Image, and Disordered Masculinity,” in *Health*, 9:2 (2005), 191. hea.sagepub.com at SEIR. Accessed 4/2/2014. quoting W. Buckley, C. Yesalis, et al “Estimated Prevalence of Anabolic Steroid Use Among Male High School Seniors,” in *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 260(63), 3441-5. (1988)

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 190.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 181.

Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Steven Segal.”¹⁷³ Although hyper-masculinity was re-packaged by GenX stars such as Will Smith, Brandon Smith, and Keanu Reeves to meet audience demands for action-packed films, Sandler rejected these masculine ideals, especially with his character Zohan in *You Don’t Mess With the Zohan* (2008),¹⁷⁴ who is a parody of the muscularity trend. Zohan is the Mossad’s Jewish super-human fighting machine, capable of leaping tall buildings in a single bound and of providing super-human stud service to scores of elderly women daily. *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott stated, “[Zohan] is principally interested in establishing its main character as a new archetype in the annals of Jewish humor.”¹⁷⁵ In Zohan, Sandler parodies the Nazi allegation that Jewish men were hypersexual, but it also highlights the masculine problem of sexual prowess. According to sex and gender psychologist Leonore Tiefer, “Sexual prowess is never permanently earned; each time it must be re-proven,”¹⁷⁶ and she believes that male sexuality is “a unique experience with particular technical performance requirements...”¹⁷⁷ Tiefer argues that sexual performance has significant influence on the confirmation of the male gender role and

¹⁷³ Taylor, 27.

¹⁷⁴ The first draft of *Zohan* was written by Sandler, Judd Apatow, and Robert Smigel in 2000, but after the September 11, 2001 attacks, was postponed due to public sensitivity. The film is based partially on the true story of Israeli ex-soldier, Nezi Arbib, who moved to southern California where he opened a hair salon. Sandler spent two weeks working with Arbib and his brothers, who are also former Israeli soldiers and hairdressers.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁵ A.O. Scott, Movie Review of *You Don’t Mess With the Zohan*. “Watch Out, He’s Packing a Blow-Dryer,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2008.

<http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/#/Watch+Out%2C+He's+Packing+a+Blow-Dryer/since1851/articles/>. Accessed 1/13/2013.

¹⁷⁶ Lenore Tiefer, “In Pursuit of the Perfect Penis: The Medicalization of Male Sexuality,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael Kimmel (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 167.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

a man's status in homosocial relationships. By perceiving oneself as a man who is sexually successful he then qualifies for the title in other parts of his life. Adding to Tiefer's argument, Michael Kimmel, quoting Kenneth Wayne, argues that "A man has his own rating, and instantly he lays it alongside of the other man." Kimmel also quotes an interviewee of psychologist Sam Osherson who stated that "by the time you're an adult, it's easy to think you're always in competition with men, for the attention of women, in sports, at work."¹⁷⁸ Whether a man is a proficient lover or not, his outward appearance affects how others view his sexuality.

Obviously, Sandler has the means to hire a personal trainer, to have the rhinoplasty that he jokes about in *Just Go With It*, and to maintain a runway perfect look, but he chooses to do otherwise. His goal is not to allow personal appearance to define his manhood either on screen or off. As previously stated, Sandler's physique and his face are average looking; he never portrays super-masculine qualities; and his character always needs to overcome some shortcoming. Due to the way he interprets his characters, his model of masculinity looks to be attainable by the average American male, and his point is to help males understand that having a 'perfect' body is neither necessary to happiness and success, nor essential to masculine identity.

Key Themes: Joking as Communication

Sandler is first and foremost a comedian if his family, school teachers, and college professors are to be believed, and he often uses jokes and wise-cracks to cover his nervousness or evade a subject he does not want to delve into during

¹⁷⁸ Kimmel, in *Theorizing Masculinities*, Brod and Kaufman, ed., 129.

interviews. His stated goal in life is to make people laugh so he uses jokes and wise-cracks in every film, even the serious ones, to bring a bit of humor to a difficult situation or lighten the tone. Additionally, it is one of the ways Sandler's character bestows approval or criticism. But why is this important to a discussion of mentoring American males in their masculinity? Scholar Peter Lyman considers jokes to be a method American males use to express their disapproval without simply confronting an issue head-on.¹⁷⁹ This leads to all sorts of miscommunication in life which Sandler's audience can observe in virtually every one of his films. In an early twentieth century study, social anthropologist Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown discovered that, "The joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism... There is a pretense of hostility and real friendliness... the relationship seems to be one of permitted disrespect."¹⁸⁰ Sandler and his teammates are often observed employing this mode of communication in the film *Grown Ups*, and Sandler's message to the audience is that jokes can be used to transmit serious truths. For example, the teammates' jokes about Kevin James' wife still nursing his three year old son work to push James into taking his fatherhood role more seriously. The problem with this method of communication is that it does not invite intimate conversations of a serious nature for fear of being ridiculed.

Lyman contends that sexist jokes are used not only to defend the social order, but also attempt to sustain gender domination and reinforce male bonding. Sandler

¹⁷⁹ Kimmel, 150.

¹⁸⁰ Owen Lynch, "Humorous Communication: Finding a Place for Humor in Communication Research," *Communication Theory* 12:4, (November 2002), 423-445. [Http://teacher.shu.edu.tw/~tyu/CTA.pdf](http://teacher.shu.edu.tw/~tyu/CTA.pdf). Accessed 4/12/2013.

uses sexist jokes sparingly, because his goal is not to vilify women, but he and his teammates adopt this communication style in *Grown Ups* when talking about their marital relationships. He also uses sexist jokes in *Spanglish* to address his wife's behavior, and in *Big Daddy* to express his dislike of his roommate's fiancé.

Lyman argues that to men, aggression is not considered violent if it is directed by rules, such as in sports, jokes, or at parties where the repartee is sharp, as long as it does not show anger. In the film *Funny People* Sandler's protégé and his roommates, all aspiring comedians, use pointed repartee as their main form of communication. It starts out fairly mild, but quickly advances to cutting and hurtful, showing the audience that it is a poor choice for maintaining friendships and does not attract members of the opposite sex. Lyman also states that "To ignore a joke, even though it makes you feel hurt or angry, is to show strength or coolness, the two primary masculine ideals of the group."¹⁸¹ In fact, expressing anger is considered a weakness and is called 'losing control.'¹⁸²

Serious Roles for Sandler's Masculinities

Adam Sandler's name usually brings to mind absurd comedy, yet only around half of his movies would fall into a comedic genre. This makes his serious films important to any meaningful discussion of his role as mentor because, based on pre-release advertising, potential viewers have some idea about the film's subject matter and whether or not it will be funny. Each serious film allows the audience to see a different aspect of some crisis in masculinity. Sandler's name alone draws people to

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 154.

¹⁸² Ibid., 161.

see films both in America and around the globe (See Appendix C), but many of his co-stars have major name recognition and a large fan base as well: Drew Barrymore, Kathy Bates, Henry Winkler, Jack Nicholson, and Jennifer Aniston, to name a few. His goal is to reach as many people as possible¹⁸³ with his message of successful manhood including the ability to address life's challenges without falling into extreme and/or negative behaviors, such as substance abuse.

Several, *Spanglish*, *Reign Over Me*, and *Punch-drunk Love*, deal with severe mental health issues. *Punch-drunk Love* (2002) tied for the Cannes Film Festival best director prize.¹⁸⁴ In it, Sandler plays a mentally ill man who has seven sisters who constantly call him or visit him at work to check up on him, repeatedly asking if he is okay. This wastes his time, frustrates him, and insults his manhood. The film is artistic, for a mature audience, and was shot and edited in a manner that assaults the viewer's senses. By the end of the film, Sandler's character "gets the girl" and in so doing achieves a form of manhood, but it is one that is extremely dependent on her for his sense of belonging. This film shows the crisis of masculinity of an adult male who must prove his hero status by protecting his love interest against a villain, but who is unable stand up to his family's constant intrusions. His immature self needs to be loved and nurtured by 'the one and only' who is almost a mother figure and who will relieve the family of the responsibility of his well-being and him of their interference.

¹⁸³ Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, Part 14, 2011. Turner Classic Movies. Also, *Late Night with David Letterman*. Interview with Adam Sandler: *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, Week of July 20, 2007. Accessed 3/29/2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmykCRZpMNk..>

¹⁸⁴ Cannes Film Festival: Awards for 2002. <http://www.imdb.com/event/ev0000147/2002>.

In his documentary on film history Mark Cousins interviews Australian filmmaker Baz Luhrmann about the films he created during the 1990s. In it, Luhrmann states, “Shakespeare and Bollywood... are singularly focused on engaging as many human beings as possible from as many types of humanity to be moved and touched by the story; *to deliver a big idea* – a big idea through an emotional experience.”¹⁸⁵ Sandler tries to deliver serious and big ideas in films such as *Big Daddy*, *Spanglish*, *Click*, *Punch-drunk Love*, and *Reign Over Me*, but his repetitive use of themes also attempts to deliver messages and ideas about achieving manhood, accepting LGBT people, the importance of finding ‘the one and only,’ becoming a good parent, getting a college education, improving communication skills, and about being comfortable in your own body.

¹⁸⁵ Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, Part 14, 2011. Turner Classic Movies. Also, *Late Night with David Letterman*. Interview with Adam Sandler: *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, Week of July 20, 2007. Accessed 3/29/2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmykCRZpMNk>.

FILM ANALYSIS

To further the argument that Adam Sandler's films are in fact well-thought-out commentary that serve to mentor American males, closer analysis is necessary. Each of the following films brings to light different forms of masculinity. Due to the sheer number of males in the film, and the wide variation of masculinities, the first to be discussed is *Grown Ups*, which features five men and the sons of three of them. Written by Adam Sandler and Fred Wolf, it is the film that best mirrors Sandler's own life.

Examples of Masculinity and Fatherhood in *Grown Ups*

Grown Ups (2010) offers numerous negative models of masculinity and characteristics of immature manhood that for the sake of humor, are often exaggerated. This is done in an attempt to show audiences that negative behavior gleans negative results. What makes this film historically relevant is that all of the portrayals of fatherhood and masculinity clearly show the influence of liberal feminism and the values of the men's movement, but at the same time, it shows that the men are not fully evolved into living the feminist ideal.¹⁸⁶

All of the men have been influenced by second-wave feminism's rejection of traditional patriarchal authority.¹⁸⁷ Sandler's wife is successful in her own career, and his sons are prone to challenge his authority. Kevin James' character has virtually no

¹⁸⁶ Wood, 4th ed, 71.

¹⁸⁷ Rampton, 2.

authority, patriarchal or otherwise. Chris Rock's has taken the new sensitive male role almost to the point of being as dependent as a nineteenth-century woman.¹⁸⁸ Rob Schneider's cries freely, faints, and molds himself to his wife's beliefs rather than retaining his own identity, while David Spade's lingers in extended adolescence. Though Sandler's character clearly exhibits the most successful model of masculinity and manhood in the film (he is the star, after all), he does not comment negatively on the choices the others have made, and in fact, encourages them to keep trying to be strong men. The message was designed for audiences to see negativity in action as opposed to Sandler passing judgment on, or verbally declaring, his choices.

The film examines a group of men who return to their home town to attend the funeral of their revered junior high basketball coach who helped guide them through their adolescent years. At one time he held the role of a father figure in the lives of the boys, who are now men. The film opens in 1978 during the championship game which Sandler's team wins. As adolescents, the characters in *Grown Ups* created a type of kinship, and though the men have moved on in their lives, the bonds still remain. Thirty years later, they return to the place of their adolescent fun to spend a weekend together. They have advanced from boyhood to manhood, with varying degrees of success. It is now 2008 and the men are in their early forties, but the visit prompts them to relapse into some of their adolescent behaviors. Each team member arrives with a need to advance his masculine identity, as well as a need to improve communication with his wife. Through interactions with wives, children, and their

¹⁸⁸ Anya Jabour, "The Language of Love," in *A Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender*, ed. Laura McCall and Donald Yacovone. (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 119.

old basketball foes, who still embody extended adolescent behaviors and attitudes, the men eventually confront their current individual immaturity.

With the exception of Schneider, the old teammates struggle through the funeral by regressing into the anxious and childish performances of inappropriate and disrespectful joking and laughter. This negative behavior shows the audience that their maturity is questionable. During the weekend Sandler inadvertently keeps running into the old competitors from the championship basketball tournament thirty years past. In particular contrast to Sandler's success, this group is depicted as blue-collar, uneducated, and less evolved in their manhood. Because these men still live and work in the community where they experienced their great adolescent humiliation, they now see the chance to redeem themselves by forcing a re-match. They serve as foils to Sandler's preferred variety of masculinity: educated and middle-class. In order for Sandler and his teammates to defend their collective masculinity they must replay their old opponents.

Sandler and his old teammates each represent a particular underdeveloped model of manhood though they have embraced some of the characteristics of female-sensitive masculine ideals. They are as follows: Sandler plays Lenny Feder, a wealthy and prosperous Hollywood agent. He represents the most successful model of manhood because he and his wife are mostly equal partners in the relationship. He respects her and her professional status, but when he thinks the situation calls for it, he is willing to take an action that he knows will make her unhappy. In an early scene the audience observes him aggressively negotiating a business deal over the

phone which proves that he is able to assert himself. His very dramatic, fashion-designer wife, Roxanne Chase-Feder, played by Salma Hayek, is equally successful, but her drama negatively impacts communication within the family and is off-putting to others. Sandler has a habit of lying to her and manipulating her in order to avoid her dramatic displays of emotion. The couple employs a nanny for their three very spoiled, non-athletic, fashion-conscious children. Though he has paid for the Fourth of July weekend rental of the cabin at the lake where they all hung out as boys, Sandler negates his wealth because he does not want to be seen as having outperformed his old teammates. He still wants to be ‘just one of the guys.’ His goal for the weekend is to get the family to do ‘normal’ things; enjoy the outdoors and the simplicity of his boyhood. He wants to prove to them that they do not need all the latest gadgets in order to have fun. The primary issue Sandler must confront is his inability to communicate truth to his wife and friends without fearing confrontation or rejection.¹⁸⁹

Kevin James plays Eric Lamonsoff, who arrives after having been laid off from his job at a furniture store. He represents a negative model of male behavior that refuses to assert his leadership, forcing his wife to mother him as well as the children. Though he and his wife are respectful and loving partners, neither is a capable leader, and his refusal to accept a mantle of authority has undoubtedly impacted his career negatively. He tries to compensate for the loss of his job and the blow to his breadwinner status by falsely claiming that he is the store’s co-owner. In

¹⁸⁹ Powell, 20 – 21.

opposition to Sandler's desire to downplay his wealth, James attempts to display success by arriving in a rented Cadillac convertible and offering to pay for everyone's dinner, though he is fearful that it will be too costly. His wife is an overly sweet, stay-at-home mom who is still nursing her four-year old son on demand, in very public settings. She has failed to curb her husband's pretensions and just nods agreeably to his antics. James excuses the protracted nursing by telling his friends that he and his wife "don't like to say no." He is an overgrown man-child who still calls his mother "Mommy," and it appears that his son will be destined to duplicate this masculine identity problem. Eventually, due to his friends' negative comments, James forcefully takes a carton of milk from an unknown child and loudly commands his son to drink milk out of a carton. When his son immediately acquiesces, James feels that his manhood has been reasserted, unfortunately he is also shown to be an inadequate father in front of his teammates through his daughter's uncontrolled behavior and tantrums. The main issue James needs to address is how he can step out of the child role and into the role of family leader by taking responsibility and by properly asserting his authority.

Chris Rock plays Kurt McKenzie, who represents the house-husband who allows his wife to pursue her career and not worry about hearth and home. He watches the cooking channel and attempts to reproduce their gourmet meals and serves as the leader of his daughter's Girl Scout troop. His wife, Deanne, works full-time and is clearly near the end of her third pregnancy. As the bread-winner, and the more aggressive partner, she also attempts the role of jokester, but it always falls a bit

short of the mark, unlike the men's easy joking and banter. Rock's wife, children, and live-in mother-in-law routinely attempt to emasculate him by treating him as if he is a "dumb housewife" who cannot do anything right. His mother-in-law actually calls him a woman and makes feminizing slurs about him, at which Sandler and the other guys just shake their heads. Rock's role as a beleaguered house-husband flies in the face of traditional masculinity, as defined by Gregory Herek.¹⁹⁰ Though Rock is not compliant or submissive, he is financially dependent, which serves to further de-masculinize him.¹⁹¹ He is hurt by the family's rudeness but does not give in, especially to his mother-in-law. He responds to her verbal abuse with some of his own and also asserts himself when his wife makes cutting remarks that undermine his manhood. He does not appear feminine or homosexual, simply "hen-pecked," in his role as the homemaker. This portrayal represents the common belief that stay-at-home parents 'don't work.' The main issue he must confront is how to communicate his feelings to his wife in a manner that will get her attention and hold her respect, and at the same time assert his parental authority over his children so that they will learn to treat all people with respect.

Rob Schneider plays Rob Hilliard, who is a parody of the new sensitive male.¹⁹² He cries openly about the coach's death and his own failure as a father, and faints when he is hit in the foot by an arrow, all of which erode his sense of manhood. He has always had a penchant for older women and his fourth wife, Gloria, is a lovely

¹⁹⁰ Herek, 76.

¹⁹¹ Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England*. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 10.

¹⁹² Wood, 4th ed, 88.

old hippie who is into natural foods and healing. When informed of the coach's death, he asks her to attend the funeral with him, whining that he "can't do it alone." However, at the coach's funeral he presents himself as the embodiment of male maturation, in a sharp contrast to the other men, that he scolds by telling them to "Grow up!" In fact, his character formation is weak; he stuffs his emotions until he explodes and ruins his relationships. He rejects his friends' adolescent male joking because he considers it to be disrespectful, setting himself above the others as having achieved a more mature manhood, but in order to appear youthful and manly he wears a toupee.

Schneider has three adult daughters, one from each of his previous marriages; two are tall and gorgeous, but the third, who looks like him, is short and rather homely. The oldest one accuses him of not being present in her life. In a new attempt at fatherhood he takes a protective stance when Spade flirts with the two beautiful daughters. As various opportunities arise, he defends his daughters with acts of violence in order to prove his manhood and fatherhood, in spite of his normally peace-loving approach to life. Schneider's character needs to address two important things during the weekend. First, he must identify the 'real man' inside, and hold that image intact, in order to remain true to himself. Secondly, he needs to prove his fatherhood to his daughters by maintaining a relationship with them.

David Spade plays the fifth member of the old team, Marcus Higgins. He represents the antithesis of the healthy masculine ideal. He is still unmarried and a profligate party-animal who has never quite grown up. He sexualizes everything and

encourages the other team members to join him in his juvenile revelry. Spade repeatedly fails to curb his risqué behavior and conversation in front of the other men's wives and children, and he defends it when confronted. His character clearly holds on to an extended adolescence and obvious arrested emotional development, with excessive alcohol consumption, much like his own father who is seen briefly at the junior high celebration. Spade's character is present to show the obvious improvements of the other men's models over his, and is a negative model of masculinity which is tolerated, but not encouraged by the other team members. At one point, James comments to Spade and the others that "[Spade] doesn't get it; he's not in a committed relationship," thus leading the audience to understand that growing up into mature manhood involves a committed relationship.¹⁹³ The main issue Spade needs to address over the weekend is to quit drinking and find a mentor who will call him to a higher level, even if he does not have a woman in his life.

As previously mentioned, for Sandler's characters, masculinity is always defined in reciprocation with female roles and/or through homosocial interactions and in *Grown Ups* this is clearly evident. Sandler and his friends, who are married and are fathers, have in fact reached new levels of maturation, in part due to the supporting nature of their wives. This is not to say that they have reached some illusory pinnacle of manhood, but they have certainly matured from the adolescent stage.

¹⁹³ Peter Laipson, "Bachelorhood," in Carroll, 45.

The use of good interpersonal communication – open, honest, and appropriate to the situation – is the primary message of this film, however the filmmakers show this by allowing the audience to observe the outcomes as the men employ negative or ineffective communication skills. What becomes increasingly apparent as the film progresses is that a good marriage is impossible without good communication. That does not mean that a man cannot reach and maintain manhood unless he has a good marriage, but it certainly helps to have a positive and reciprocal relationship.

For the old team members, open communication with each other, and with their wives, is a distinct problem. The audience sees this through Sandler's behavior when he paid for the cabin rental for the entire Fourth of July weekend and cancelled the family's trip to Milan, for his wife's business, without her knowledge. When she confronts him, he whines to her, "I was scared to tell you; it was easier to keep it a secret." This inappropriate and deceitful behavior suggests a lack of trust between spouses, as well a failure to communicate and negotiate within the framework of the marital relationship and it de-masculinizes him. Sandler and Hayek also fail to communicate with their children regarding the nanny's job description, which feeds their sense of entitlement. Rock's character is frequently invalidated by his wife, yet he consistently fails to communicate his feelings about not receiving respect from her and the other family members. Because of this, he turns to Sandler's nanny to have a friendly conversation, sans insults and jokes at his expense, inciting the negative a negative jealous reaction from his wife. Though Kevin James's character is embarrassed by his wife's protracted nursing, he does not communicate this to her

effectively and negotiate the problem until being forced to by his old teammates. Schneider has an inability to communicate effectively with his spouses – ex and present – and his poor communication skills have clearly played a part in his failures as a husband and father. His teammates comment that “he’s always in love so quick and then one day he snaps,” When he loses his temper, he uses insults to declare his anger, and the marriage ends. This shows a lack of self-control, and is a hallmark of immature manhood.¹⁹⁴ This time he displays the same behavior, but Gloria uses the incident to encourage open communication with the others. The audience is able to view these interactions, judge them on their own merits, and then potentially learn from watching the negative outcomes of poor communication as compared to the rare examples of positive and direct communication that lead to a desirable outcome.

Joking is one of Sandler’s key themes and he uses it in most of his films, because when humor is the goal, joking is the medium. The *Grown Ups* teammates (except Schneider) exhibit the use of irreverent joking to cover their emotions, rather than risk looking feminine or weak in front of each other. They also use jokes and teasing to encourage behavioral changes in each other.¹⁹⁵ Sandler uses teasing and joking as his primary means of communication with everyone except his children, in place of employing a more direct conversational form. All of the team members use sexual joking and innuendo as a method of asserting their masculinity amongst themselves. Sociologist Gary Alan Fine contends that this is a mode of

¹⁹⁴ Lyman, in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 161.

¹⁹⁵ Lyman in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 151.

communication that men use to establish their social sphere and keep females out.¹⁹⁶ Fine states that this desire to remain separate stems from resentment of their need of, and desire for, the women they cannot live without: mothers and wives.¹⁹⁷ This is true especially when wives have to chastise their man-boy husbands to keep them within bounds. It also explains why when Spade jokingly insults Schneider's wife, Schneider does not confront him; it presents the perfect opportunity to get even with his wife without saying anything, and again, it speaks to the issue of poor communication skills within the marriage. Schneider's character is the most sensitive member of the old team and does not employ jokes in order to communicate. He is not afraid to be poetic and sentimental but he ends up looking like a failed man.

Fatherhood, and what it definitely should not be, is another of the key messages that Sandler tries to convey in *Grown Ups*. This film demonstrates the juncture of Sandler's upbringing with his father who was a strong mentor and his living with the influences of liberal pro-feminism. At first glance Sandler's character appears to be a modern interpretation of the traditional American patriarch, but his sensitivity to the fears of his young daughter, his whining about being "scared to tell," his endorsement of his wife's work, and her financial success, give lie to the assertion of some scholars that he is selling patriarchy.¹⁹⁸ One of his character's big problems is that though he is a financial success, and commanding when it comes to business, he is a very permissive parent. His sons are spoiled by the family's wealth and behave

¹⁹⁶ Kimmel, 18.

¹⁹⁷ Gary Alan Fine, "One of the Boys: Women in Male-Dominated Settings," in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael Kimmel. (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 134.

¹⁹⁸ Alilunas, 108.

disrespectfully toward him; but wealth is not the real problem. His character seems to employ the negotiation model of child discipline,¹⁹⁹ but he acknowledges that his children are spoiled and bratty (all which would be utterly unacceptable in a traditional patriarchal household). Sandler believes this to be a potential problem in his real life. During an interview regarding *Grown Ups* a journalist asked him, “As a dad yourself, did the idea for this movie have anything to do with anxieties about raising elitist Beverly Hills kids who might turn out bratty?” Sandler responded, “The idea of my kids being spoiled? I go to sleep thinking about it and I wake up thinking about it! I’m trying to do the right thing, but with the amount of money I have, it’s difficult to raise children the way I was raised.”²⁰⁰

Kevin James and his wife have gone even further in the permissive parenting style. Their eight- or nine-year old obese daughter throws outrageous temper tantrums in public settings when she is denied something she wants, especially when it comes to food. Rather than discipline the girl, Dad says nothing and Mom steps in and attempts to cajole her into better behavior. Mom also is at the heart of the problem with the four-year old son and his nursing, though James tells his teammates that he and his wife “don’t like to say no.”²⁰¹ Rock’s son and daughter freely insult their father and he fails to step in to correct the problem, which is obviously exacerbated by the disrespect and verbal abuse he receives from his wife and mother-in-law. Schneider’s daughters are adults in the film, so it is a bit late for him to try to

¹⁹⁹ See Stearns’ argument on page 82.

²⁰⁰ Prairie Miller. “Adam Sandler Interview: The funnyman on who gets the most laughs in *Grown Ups* and being a parent,” (July 4, 2010). <http://archive.longislandpress.com/2010/07/04/adam-sandler-interview/>. Accessed 4/12/2013.

²⁰¹ Stearns, *Anxious Parents*, 79.

discipline them; however he attempts to forge new bonds of friendship with them by exhibiting fatherly traits in defending the young women from rude remarks and ogling males. By the end of the film all of the children now appear to be well-behaved, average kids, rather than the spoiled, angry, and entitled brats they appeared to be earlier. What the audience can take away from the film is that fathers who actively parent by asserting a loving brand of authority will greatly improve their children's behavior.²⁰²

In light of Michael Kimmel's definition, "*masculinity* must constantly be demonstrated"²⁰³ so that a man is not perceived as feminine (see page 11), and due to the long-term mentoring effect of *Grown Ups*, some of its many examples of negative masculine performance deserve particular mention. Sandler's mentoring is increased exponentially because this is a family film that will be watched on television and on home entertainment systems for many years to come.

Grown Ups engages so many types of negative masculine behavior that it would be onerous to review them all in depth, but a short summary will at least give readers an indication of Sandler's purpose. All of the males in this film make determined efforts to demonstrate their masculinity, but those efforts generally fail to produce the desired outcome. In a dare-devilish display of masculine bravado, James' character swings out over the lake on a rope but forgets to let go over the water. After hitting a tree and falling down a hill, he comes up trying to appear unscathed, to show his manliness in front of his buddies and the children. All of the

²⁰² Ibid., 57.

²⁰³ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 119-120.

old team members display risk-taking behavior by playing a game from childhood known as “arrow roulette.”²⁰⁴ Schneider’s character wins, but gets an arrow through his foot for his efforts, and naturally, Sandler plays the hero and saves the dog from being hurt. According to Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity is a homosocial enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood,”²⁰⁵ and this is exactly what the audience sees Sandler’s team members trying to achieve.

Other routine forms of negative masculinity that appear in the film include Bailey-the-bully who is constantly challenging a self-controlled Sandler. His behavior includes aggressive posturing and trying to prove his athletic prowess, obviously a left-over from junior high.²⁰⁶ When visiting a waterpark, Sandler and his oldest son are goaded into proving their masculinity by Bailey and his son, who acts just like his father.²⁰⁷ The friends who sexually objectify Schneider’s skimpily dressed daughter, while she is bending over her car’s engine; the hyper-masculine body builder at the pool who flirts with the wives; the jock mentality of the basketball game, and of course, lots of “booby” feeling, watching, and discussion are all performances of masculinity that attempt to prove that the men are not like women.

One scene reveals the men’s maturity within their marriages. Late one evening, with kids asleep, Schneider turns on some music and suggests that they dance. He, Sandler, and Rock embrace the moment to enjoy dancing with their wives as mature

²⁰⁴ Kimmel, in *Theorizing Masculinities*, Brod and Kaufman, ed., 133.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

husbands and lovers. James, however, puts a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket on his head while he dances which brings his wife to smile condescendingly at her man-child's immaturity. Spade, having no partner of his own, embraces his extended adolescence by disrupting Sandler's dance with a round of drunken silliness. This shows the audience that Spade's lack of a wife and his alcohol consumption both contribute to his fruitless and unrewarding behavior. The audience is able to see that mature manhood, in Sandler's middle-class, educated style is the most fulfilling and successful on all levels. That is because, according to Kimmel, "[men] constantly parade the markers of manhood wealth, power, status, sexy women in front of other men, desperate for their approval,²⁰⁸ and Sandler's character has them all.

Ultimately, during the basketball re-match between the two teams from junior high, it comes down to a battle between Sandler's character, Bailey-the-bully, and their two sons. The win is crucial to Bailey because of his jealousy over Sandler's success compared to his own job at a pizza parlor. In the end, when the film audience and Sandler's teammates all know he can make the winning shot, he glances over at Bailey's wife and the local guys. Their faces show acute desperation for this victory which is necessary for them to redeem themselves and to prove their manhood, at least in their own minds.²⁰⁹ Realizing that he and his teammates do not need the win in order to demonstrate their manhood, Sandler purposely misses the shot, proving that he has, in fact, reached manhood Grown Up.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 129.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

Equally important to the film's message is that though the fathers are seen playing and interacting with their children in ways that portray the ideal of post-feminist fatherhood, which taught that fathers should be 'buddies' to their kids,²¹⁰ they finally manage to imbue their masculinity with enough good communication and loving authority that the children's behavior is transformed. Thus, the weekend served as a rite of passage that was focused on maturing communication skills and better fathering. The film also sends a message that homosocial relationships can help males reach manhood and thereby be better able to maintain a healthy relationship with their wives and children.²¹¹

Examples of Masculinity in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry*

Sandler's film, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry* (2007) was a rather daring attempt to address homophobia from a comedic perspective. It was written and conceived against the backdrop of various LGBT political battles in America, including same-sex marriage. Films such as *Philadelphia* (1993) tried to reveal the problems faced by AIDS victims and the homosexual population as a whole, but they were addressed to a different audience than Sandler's films usually attract.²¹²

There are four key messages in *Chuck & Larry*: the first is that homosocial bonds are vital to forming a healthy manhood because men are better able to stabilize their personal form of masculinity in relation to other men. The second key message is that homosexuality does not negate masculinity, therefore LGBT people deserve to

²¹⁰ Jessica Weiss, in *A Shared Experience*, ed. McCall and Yacovone, 355.

²¹¹ John Ibson, "Male Friendship," in Carroll, 278-281. Also, Samuel Osherson. *Wrestling With Love: How Men Struggle With Intimacy With Women, Children, Parents, and Each Other*. (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 14.

²¹² *Philadelphia* on IMDb. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107818/>. Accessed 5/2/2014.

be treated in the same manner as heterosexuals. The third message is that homophobia is incompatible with mature manhood: mature males are not fearful of endangering their manhood by associating with homosexuals. The fourth key message of the film shows, once again, that joking and insults are a negative form of communication and are not conducive to mature and rewarding relationships. As usual, once Sandler's film character has achieved mature manhood he is much more capable of meaningful communication with both men and women.

Chuck and Larry takes the bold step of addressing several aspects and stereotypes of homosexuality, including race and religion, and the filmmakers do this by using both direct and indirect approaches. For example, by casting Richard Chamberlain as the head of the city council, the film makes an indirect comment that appearances may be deceiving when it comes to sexuality. Chamberlain was the definition of male sexual appeal for American women during the 1960s as *Dr. Kildare*, but in 1989 the information that he is gay was leaked to the press. At other times, *Chuck and Larry* directly addresses the subject of homophobia through its many observations of males who are antagonistic toward LGBT people.

Scholar Gregory Herek states that "to be 'a man' in contemporary American society is to be homophobic – that is, to be hostile toward homosexual persons in general and gay men in particular."²¹³ Citing Joseph Pleck, he goes on to say that the defensive attitudes seem to be a consequence of feeling uncertain about adequately meeting gender-role demands, and this may lead to extreme conformity to what are

²¹³ Kimmel, 68.

considered to be gender-appropriate traits.²¹⁴ According to Herek, being masculine means being “not feminine” and “not homosexual.” He postulates that heterosexual men have such negative reactions to homosexual males because

Conformity to social standards and defense against anxiety push heterosexual men to express homophobic attitudes and provide rewards in the form of social support and reduced anxiety, both of which increase self-esteem. In other words, heterosexual men reaffirm their male identity by attacking gay men.²¹⁵

Firemen, like those portrayed in *Chuck and Larry*, may be more disposed to homophobia than other men because they sleep in bunk rooms and have common showers. Their fear is that gay men will observe and assess them in much the same way they themselves observe and assess females. Traditionally, firemen have been perceived as low-paid, uneducated heroes, similar to soldiers and their public masculine identity is derived from their hero status.²¹⁶ Also, traditional heterosexual rationale saw homosexuality as a weakness and “queers, faggots, and homos” were considered failed men, therefore straight men could not allow homosexuality in their midst.²¹⁷ Thus, the homophobic firemen have too much to lose by accepting gay Chuck and Larry.

In *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, there are two fictive kinships: the firemen at Chuck and Larry’s New York City fire station and the LGBT group; respectively, homosocial and homosexual. Fictive kinships, social ties not based on consanguinal (blood) or marital ties, much like that of Sandler and his college friends,

²¹⁴ Kimmel, 71, Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity*. (Cambridge, MS: The MIT Press, 1981).

²¹⁵ Kimmel, 71-72.

²¹⁶ Gerzon, 30-31.

²¹⁷ Kimmel in *Manhood in America*, 6. Also, Herek in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 72.

have been of great importance in America's history as a country of immigrants.²¹⁸

The homosocial group is very similar to the men in *Grown Ups*, but in this case, they are buddies who happen to work together, with all the macho camaraderie, sexist jokes, and personal insults typical of immature men in Sandler's films. The firemen have a "code" which demands that when a man is injured, in danger, or in need, the other guys, especially Chuck (Sandler) in this case, step in to take care of him.

Though the code does not specify heterosexuality, it is implied, due to the assumed and performed traditional masculine ideal of the mostly white working-class firemen. The firemen represent what scholar Aaron Taylor calls "the über-masculine heroes of straight American culture."²¹⁹ Chuck and Larry's heterosexual friendship depicts the post-modern American bromance in which male friends are free to publicly declare their love for each other.²²⁰ In the case of these two, they display both personal and professional fraternity.

The story unfolds due to what Sandler described to David Letterman as a "flaw in the system"²²¹ that did not allow city employees to change their life insurance beneficiaries at will, but only within one year of the occurrence of life events, which is a common practice. After a near fatal accident, Larry (James) pressures Chuck (Sandler) to pretend to be his gay lover and the two sign a domestic partners statement for the city; a homophobic Sandler refers to this as being "paper

²¹⁸ Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 121.

²¹⁹ Taylor in Shary, 92.

²²⁰ John Ibson, "Male Friendship," in Carroll, 278-281.

²²¹ *Late Night with David Letterman*. Interview with Adam Sandler re: *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, Week of July 20, 2007. Accessed 3/29/2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmykCRZpMNk>.

faggots.” Sandler then becomes James’ beneficiary so the children will be cared for if he dies and Chuck (Sandler) moves in with Larry (James) and his school-aged children. Unfortunately, a city watchdog becomes suspicious of the pair due to their ridiculous references to their gay love-making, so he sends investigator Fitzer to verify his opinion. Both city employees are slightly built and are not ‘manly’ or ‘macho’ in their personas. This is important as it indirectly implies that if they are gay they might be especially determined to expose this type of deceit. Fearing that the city is going to prosecute them for fraud, James seeks the advice of an attorney who suggests that they go to Canada and officially wed. Sandler is immediately attracted to the beautiful, intelligent woman (Jessica Biel), who is very sympathetic to their plight because her brother is gay. She invites Chuck and Larry to a large AIDS fundraiser, a costume ball, where they mix with all types of LGBT people. Both men are clearly uncomfortable pretending to be homosexual, but Sandler ends up defending the rights of the LGBT community to picketers outside the building. With each interaction, especially those in which he is insulted for being gay, Sandler gains appreciation for the LGBT cause. Biel and Sandler become ‘girl friends’ and she feels safe undressing in front of him because of his fictional sexual orientation.

When the firemen get wind of Chuck and Larry’s new relationship, they ostracize the pair because they are homosexual – not ‘real men.’ Every past action is analyzed in light of this revelation and the other firemen begin to display overt homophobia toward them out of fear that they might become targets for Chuck and Larry’s homosexual behavior. Their attorney tells them that they can get a court

order and have the firemen suspended for discrimination, but Sandler does not want to break “the code.” However, when the city takes Chuck and Larry to court for their fraud, in a renewed show of fraternity, all of the firemen join Sandler and James at the courthouse and declare themselves “partners for life.” Though the pair is guilty, they plead their case and Sandler gives a touching speech about the hurtfulness of homosexual slurs. All of the firemen are thrown into jail as accessories to the fraud, because they perjured themselves in support of Chuck and Larry. However, because they have become celebrities in the gay community, the city offers them a generous plea bargain in exchange for them posing for a calendar to be sold as a fundraiser for AIDS research. In the end, other firemen come out as gays, one of them marries Biel’s brother in front of the happily beaming faces of family and friends, and Sandler “gets the girl.”

Key characters are as follows: Adam Sandler plays Chuck Levine, a man who shows his friendship both on duty and off. Sandler represents the consummate *Playboy* bachelor model of middle-class, heterosexual masculinity, and his fellow firemen are openly envious of his countless sexual conquests. He subscribes to numerous pornographic magazines, receives large boxes of sexual accoutrements through the mail, refers to himself as a “whore,” and could be described as hypersexual. He uses joking insults as his primary form of communication, and these serve to demonstrate the depth of his immaturity.²²² Though he does not want to pretend to be gay, and in fact is homophobic, due to the fireman’s code, he accepts the pretense

²²² Lyman, in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 150.

in order to keep Larry from having to quit the fire department. The audience is able to watch his evolution from homophobic to becoming pro-gay because he has experienced walking in the shoes of a homosexual. In the process, he meets Biel who becomes the compelling reason for him to give up his *Playboy* lifestyle and embrace a traditional form of heterosexual masculinity.

Sandler's best friend is Larry Valentine (Kevin James), a widower who lost his wife to cancer two years earlier. He is still obsessed with his deceased wife and has had a very difficult time trying to adjust to his single father status. James represents traditional white blue-collar masculinity. He depends on a housekeeper-nanny because he works twenty-four hour shifts, but he is afraid to confront her about the poor job she is doing for fear that she will quit. This makes him look weak, but when the other firemen believe he and Chuck are gay he is not afraid to challenge them about their rejection of Chuck and remind the men of the many favors Chuck has done for them in the past.

Jessica Biel plays Sandler's love interest and she represents a model of womanhood who is educated and stands up for what she believes in. She also represents family members who are willing to support the choices of homosexual relatives. Her brother, played by Nick Swardson, is an extremely flamboyant individual. He is dressed in a butterfly costume for the AIDS Awareness Costume Ball, and runs around flapping his arms and whooping wildly. For his wedding he wears a pink suit and hat and represents the outrageously dressed gay male, who enjoys putting on a show. Biel is very fond of her brother despite his eccentricities

and is supportive of his sexuality. When she discovers that Sandler has been lying to her about being gay she is offended and refuses to speak to him. After her brother's marriage to a fireman who has come out of the closet (thanks to Chuck and Larry), Sandler apologizes and she agrees to dance with him.

Ving Rhames portrays a tough looking black fireman who is new to the firehouse. His perpetual scowl makes him look as if he has spent time in prison and Sandler jokingly accuses him of being an ax murderer. Because Chuck and Larry are exposed as 'gay,' Rhames' character is able to accept his own homosexuality, changing his outlook on life. He tells Chuck (Sandler), "My whole life I've been living a lie, but you and Larry have given me the strength to be true to myself." He marries Swardson at the same wedding chapel Chuck and Larry used, and he represents two additional aspects of homosexual masculinity: black homosexual males and LGBT people who are struggling to come out. As a large, muscular, black man, Rhames speaks to the fact that LGBT people come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and personalities.

According to film scholar Timothy Shary, "The increasing visibility of non-heterosexual men was undeniable as the stigma of AIDS in the 1990s gave way to more tolerant and mature opinions about sex."²²³ This has allowed filmmakers such as Adam Sandler to make movies that address homosexuality without fear of much censure. Aaron Taylor describes *Chuck and Larry* as having "unrealized potential as

²²³ Shary, 3.

a radically progressive film,²²⁴ though he accuses it of having a good dose of liberal humanism and using drag queens to portray gay stereotypes. But Taylor also states that “the film provides some deft mockery of certain entrenched straight perceptions of gay life such as Chuck’s efforts to ‘gay up’ their house in order to satisfy a fraud inspector [which] involves buying Barry Manilow CDs.”²²⁵

What makes this film truly significant is its target audience. This story could have been written as a serious dramatic presentation, without the humor, but it would have appealed to an entirely different audience, and depending on how it was promoted, one that would likely have been pro-gay to start with. The gay stereotypes, the straight perceptions of gay life, and the liberal humanism are there by design because the lowbrow film is designed to reach Sandler’s typical, primarily adolescent, male audience. Sandler is teaching the audience about the discrimination, marginalization, and the verbal abuse that LGBT people encounter.²²⁶

Chuck and Larry was written and conceived against the backdrop of the gay marriage battle in America which Biel refers to during a passionate speech when first meeting the pair in her office. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on September 21, 1996 and denied same-sex couples the right to be identified as spouses for the purposes of receiving federal marriage benefits, though it did not prevent individual states from recognizing the

²²⁴ Taylor in Shary, 41.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ See “Timeline: Milestones in American Gay Rights Movement,” on *American Experience* at PBS.org. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/stonewall/> for broad coverage of events.

unions.²²⁷ Scholar Maria San Filippo has argued that *Chuck and Larry* (2007) displays a pseudo-tolerance toward homosexuality “that reeks of the ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ ethos of the era.”²²⁸ The firemen’s acceptance of Chuck and Larry as heterosexual men versus their rejection of them as homosexual men lends credibility to her statement.²²⁹

In addition to the film’s key messages there are a number of other aspects of homosexuality and performed masculinities that the filmmakers use to further their story, and their mission to change perceptions. Due to their long-term mentoring capabilities these need to be examined. Early in the film Larry is understood to be worried about his effeminate young son, Eric. The boy plays with his sister’s Easy Bake Oven, sings, tap dances, and does the splits. In his concern about his son’s interest in things that he feels are feminizing, James directs the boy to watch sports on television in an attempt to alter the direction of his gender formation. Eric represents a very important aspect of homosexuality: the way parents deal with homosexual tendencies in their male children. Many Americans still consider homosexuality to be more behavioral than genetic, and many heterosexual parents hope they may be able to alter the outcome through behavior modification. Conversely, though Larry’s daughter plays soccer and is scoring goals, he does not identify her gender-bending

²²⁷ H.R. 3396, pub. the 104th Congress of the United States of America, Accessed 2/2/201.

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-104hr3396enr/pdf/BILLS-104hr3396enr.pdf>.

²²⁸ Maria San Filippo. “More than Buddies: *Wedding Crashers* and the Bromance as Comedy of (re)Marriage Equality,” in *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*, Timothy Shary, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 182.

²²⁹ The 1950 Uniform Code of Military Justice, established rules regarding discharge of homosexuals in the ranks, remained in place until 1993, when President Bill Clinton issued “a defense directive that military applicants should not be asked about their sexual orientation” Don’t ask, don’t tell.

sports success with lesbianism and appears proud of her athletic prowess. When Sandler determines, in his totally unscientific and ridiculous way, that Eric is unlikely to change, he encourages the child to pursue his artistic talents. His goal is to help Eric be true to who he really is, but this occurs only after Sandler's transition from homophobia to LGBT acceptance.²³⁰

When Sandler and James are on the way to get married the taxi driver says the words "queer" and "faggot," which prompts the pair to assault him. The taxi driver represents the traditional American homophobic reaction to gays,²³¹ while Sandler and James represent the all too common heterosexual reaction to being called homosexual, and both are negative representations of mature manhood. The slight Asian man at the wedding chapel displays feminine characteristics such as vacuuming the carpet, high pitched giggling, and wearing a pink mantle during the ceremony, but the audience does not know for certain whether he is gay. He is representative of the heterosexual perception that a person who exhibits non-masculine characteristics must be gay, confirming Herek's theory.²³²

The attendees at the AIDS fundraiser/costume ball illustrate that there is as much diversity within homosexuality as there is in the rest of the population, but it is perhaps not so helpful to Sandler's positive LGBT message because the costumes make the attendees look bizarre rather than like 'normal' people. When the LGBT group steps outside to leave the event, they encounter an aggressively vocal group of

²³⁰ *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry* – Adam Sandler and Kevin James Interview. *Movieweb.com*, (no date). <http://www.movieweb.com/movie/i-now-pronounce-you-chuck-and-larry/adam-sandler-and-kevin-james-interview>. Accessed 4/26/2013.

²³¹ See discussion on page 81 for further details.

²³² Herek in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 73.

religious right demonstrators who represent Americans whose strong religious beliefs compel them to speak out against homosexuality. For Sandler, their method of engagement is a form of bullying and it becomes a turning point for his character when he sees that the insults cause some of the LGBT people to cry. When the leader of the group, a man who says he is a minister, calls gays “faggots,” in a show of “manly vigor,” Sandler is photographed punching him and then politely informs him that “the accepted vernacular is gay.” The following day pictures are in the paper and in addition to the other firemen, the principal at the school Larry’s children attend tells him that the school does not want his help with an upcoming camping trip or as a Little League coach. Larry proceeds to assault the principal and Eric attacks a boy who is taunting him about his father’s homosexuality: this informs the audience that homosexuals are not sissies.²³³ The violence portrayed in the film also indicates that Sandler believes that rude and insulting people sometimes deserve to be punched. As stated earlier, what Sandler’s comedic movies attempt to communicate to audience members about masculinity is that when the well-being of others is at stake it is time to ‘man-up.’

At the end of the film, as a result of Chuck’s and Larry’s homosexual declaration, two other firemen recognize and admit their own homosexuality, which shows the audience that homosexuals are among us, whether we know it or not, and in some cases they feel forced to live a lie to protect themselves. As a result of the

²³³ One of the key arguments of the Don’t ask, don’t tell debate was a Pentagon study that revealed gays posed no threat to military readiness. “A history of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell,’” in “Post Politics,” *The Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/dont-ask-dont-tell-timeline/>. Accessed 12/09/2013.

pair's interaction with the various LGBT people, throughout the course of the story they change their definition of what counts as 'masculine.' In a courtroom attempt to address homophobia, Sandler tells the audience "Just because you're gay doesn't mean you're horny for every guy you meet." This is a big statement that addresses one of heterosexual males' fears. The film also takes the position that homosexuals are fully 'men.'²³⁴

One of the film's key messages is that jokes and insults are a negative form of communication, though they initially appear to serve as a bonding agents for the firemen, especially Sandler and those who hope to emulate his heterosexual popularity with the ladies. As mentioned previously, jokes indirectly express emotions and pressures that may intrude on normal living.²³⁵ This is especially true for first responders who use joking as a method of detaching themselves emotionally from the traumas they deal with on a daily basis; and this includes firemen who usually work twenty-four hour shifts, which creates its own tensions. Scholar Peter Lyman argues that, "Male bonding in everyday life frequently takes the form of a group joking relationship by which men create a serial kind of intimacy to 'negotiate' the latent tension and aggression they feel toward each other. The humor of male bonding relationships generally is sexual and aggressive, and frequently consists of sexist or racist jokes."²³⁶ Lyman believes that jokes expose the manner in which social groups are gendered and are constructed around the rules of male bonding.

²³⁴ Gerzon, 236-238. Also Bly, page x.

²³⁵ See page 94.

²³⁶ Lyman in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 161.

The firemen's fraternal link was almost wholly a joking relationship. In essence, the joking was a type of "ritual exchange of insults that functioned to create group solidarity."²³⁷ In the fire station it was of primary importance to be able to tolerate the ridicule²³⁸ and not be upset by it, such as when Sandler repeatedly jokes about James' weight, yet at the culmination of the trial. Sandler only realizes his error when James acknowledges that it hurts his feelings.

Several of Sandler's films, but most especially *Chuck & Larry*, reveal that homophobic fears are misplaced and should be replaced with tolerance for individual choice. During an interview about the film in July 2007, Adam Sandler and Kevin James were asked by *MovieWeb.com* what they hoped audiences would take from their new film. Sandler told the interviewer that "I want people to be more open minded; to let people be who they are."²³⁹ He often reiterates this "Live, and let live" philosophy in interviews. Based on *Chuck and Larry's* content, as well as on his interviews, it is reasonable to assume that Sandler is an ally of the LGBT community.

Examples of Masculinity and Fatherhood in *Spanglish*

Spanglish is not a typical Adam Sandler movie simply because it was not written by Sandler and his cohorts. It is a thoughtful story, and to date, it is Sandler's most serious and dramatic performance of American masculinity and fatherhood. It was written, directed, and produced by James L. Brooks, an entertainment. Brooks explained his choice of Sandler to play the lead to Jeff Otto of *IGN's FilmForce*: "He

²³⁷ Ibid., 155.

²³⁸ Ibid., 161.

²³⁹ *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry* – Adam Sandler and Kevin James Interview. *Movieweb.com*, (no date). <http://www.movieweb.com/movie/i-now-pronounce-you-chuck-and-larry/adam-sandler-and-kevin-james-interview>. Accessed 4/26/2013.

came into the office and there was a quality about him that really stuck with me. He's one of the best human beings I've ever met. You get a lot of pleasure from working with him. He's a walking tutorial on how we should deal with each other."²⁴⁰ From Brooks' response it might be assumed that Sandler's real-life masculinity is sound, generous, and tangible. *Spanglish*, narrated by the Mexican housekeeper's daughter, compares her mother's concept of Latin machismo with Sandler's character, who is a sensitive father and frustrated husband.

Sandler plays a well-known chef, who is deeply conflicted about his marriage to a hyperactive, hyperathletic, highly competitive, anorexic woman who appears to have bi-polar disorder.²⁴¹ Played by Téa Leoni, she is insecure, and likely to destroy what would be a happy home if she could just relax. She is also systematically destroying her daughter's self-esteem by trying to force the pre-pubescent girl to lose weight. Leoni impulsively hires a young Mexican woman, Flor, played by Paz Vega, who has not learned English, to keep house for the family. The film juxtaposes the culture of the upper-middle-class white family with the warm and loving family of the the Latina housekeeper. Vega is forced to choose between losing her position or taking her daughter to live in the white household during a summer at the beach. While helpful, due to the child's bilingual ability, Leoni seizes the opportunity to further Americanize the thin, beautiful Mexican girl and thus marginalizes her own chubby, freckle-faced daughter. Both Sandler and Vega are appalled at this behavior,

²⁴⁰ Jeff Otto. "IGN FilmForce talks with the often shy comic about playing it more serious in James L. Brooks' *Spanglish*," *IGN*. [www.ign.com/articles/2004/12/16/interview-adam-sandler?page+\(1-3\)](http://www.ign.com/articles/2004/12/16/interview-adam-sandler?page+(1-3)). Accessed 2/8/2013.

²⁴¹ "Bipolar Disorder," *National Institute of Mental Health*. Accessed 3/4/2013. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/bipolar-disorder/complete-index.shtml>.

but due to the language barrier, have difficulty communicating with each other. Over the summer Vega studies English and the communication improves.

Leoni increasingly intrudes on the mother-daughter relationship. When Vega decides she has had enough, she returns to the house at night to collect her daughter and to quit the job. Leoni, who has taken a lover, has chosen that night to sobbingly confess all to her husband, who is stunned. His mother-in-law convinces Vega to leave things until the next day and as she is leaving, Sandler also departs. He insists that he must take her home because if he doesn't he will worry about her all night long, and says, "I can't handle that right now." Instead, he takes her to his restaurant and proceeds to cook her one of his four star meals which is followed by some kissing. They are seen cuddling on a sofa and one strap of her sun dress is off her shoulder, leading the audience to wonder just how far the kissing went. She tells him that "There are some mistakes you can't make when you have children," admits that she loves him, and then quickly leaves. The following morning she returns to the house to resign her position and retrieve her daughter. They tearfully say their goodbyes to everyone except Sandler who is waiting outside the gate for her. Sandler and Vega are able to hug briefly before her daughter comes out and as the two depart she once again expresses her love. The film ends as he turns back to the house with a look of utter bewilderment.

The key characters in this film include the following: Adam Sandler plays John Claskey, the owner of a small, exclusive restaurant and a world class chef. When a *New York Times* food critic arrives in Los Angeles specifically to critique his

establishment Sandler panics because he has seen how success has changed the personality of another restaurant where he worked. When he is named The Best Chef in America and given a four star rating for his restaurant he worries that the only way to go is down, and he privately cries, “Four stars! And I’ve never been more unhappy.” This is in a large part due to his fear of neglecting his fatherhood role in order to hold on to the top position. Though he maintains a busy work schedule, which precludes his being home in the evening, he enjoys interacting with his children by helping with their homework and playing games with them. He has a special bond with his daughter, who is struggling through pre-adolescence; they are each other’s greatest cheerleaders. He is clearly takes his fatherhood role seriously, is the more sensitive parent, and is more in tune with the needs of his children than is his wife.

Early in the story his wife brings home new clothes for the daughter and takes them into her room with a great deal of fanfare, as if she has done something marvelous. Sandler, the daughter, and Vega, the housekeeper, are all excited until the girl realizes that her mother has deliberately bought everything one size too small. The girl is hurt by her mother’s pressure to force her to lose weight by purchasing clothes she cannot enjoy. Sandler is appalled by his wife’s actions and the housekeeper expects him to intervene in his fatherhood role, but Sandler says little and then escapes the house to take Vega to the bus stop. During the ride he vents his anger, and although she cannot understand what he is saying, he yells, “I’m running out of excuses for the lady of the house!” He begins to cry and tells her it breaks his

heart that his wife refuses to see what a wonderful daughter they have. The narrator comments that, “He appeared to be a good man, but to someone with first-hand knowledge of Latin macho, he seemed to have the emotions of a Mexican woman.” His tears, his non-confrontational manner, and his active parenting are all markers of a sensitive male who cares deeply about his family, but as with many men, he does not know how to communicate with his wife in order to change the situation.²⁴²

Leoni’s character is representative of the female professional who competes with her husband for primacy rather than pursuing a balanced relationship.²⁴³ She is extremely controlling, nervous, insecure, and hyperactive, and she was recently “downsized” from her job at a commercial design company. Her job loss has impacted her sense of self-worth which is exposed when she comments, “My husband is a top chef – I’m sure that makes me something.” She perpetually cloaks her destructive tendencies in a guise of caring and is highly critical of the people closest to her. Leoni makes ill-advised choices such as hiring a housekeeper who does not speak English; this is indicative of both her inability to think logically and her desperation to find help to keep the household running smoothly. Her behavior is elitist and continually crosses important cultural boundaries. When she admits carrying on an affair, Leoni tells Sandler that she wants to feel like he is not nuts to be in love with her. In the end, rather than taking responsibility for her own actions, she blames her infidelity and all of her neuroses on her mother, who lives with the family.

²⁴² Samuel Osherson. *Wrestling With Love: How Men Struggle With Intimacy With Women, Children, Parents, and Each Other*. (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 14. Also, Wood, 4th ed., 177.

²⁴³ Vicki C. Rachlin, “Fair vs. Equal Role Relations in Dual-Career and Dual-Earner Families: Implications for Family Interventions,” in *Family Relations* 36:2 (Apr. 1987), 187-192. Jstor.org. Accessed 5/5/2014.

Her husband is disappointed in his marriage and the camera shows this through facial expressions of irritation and frustration. It is also revealed in telling comments such as, “Great God in Heaven, save me,” when he deals with his troubled wife. Sandler’s disappointment has translated itself into inattentiveness whenever he and Leoni disagree. On the surface he seems to represent the stereotypical insensitive male, but in this instance there is a non-verbal message that he just does not know what to do to make things better. Generally, he tries to placate Leoni so she does not create more chaos. She dominates the relationship even in the bedroom, where she collapses after an orgasm but does not allow him to finish, reversing feminist perceptions of the sexually insensitive man.²⁴⁴

Leoni’s mother is played by Cloris Leachman, who portrays a retired, well-known jazz singer. She always has an alcoholic beverage at hand, but is a cheerful drunk who loves her grandchildren. Leachman is a stabilizing influence in the household, even with her alcoholism, because she tries to temper her daughter’s careless decisions, and she does not openly disagree or criticize anyone. By her presence in the home Sandler is better able to go to work and not worry unduly about the welfare of his children, but conversely, her presence probably has increased her daughter’s insecurities. At the point where Sandler has left a sobbing Leoni in the wake of her admission of infidelity, Leoni accuses her mother by saying, “You were an alcoholic and a wildly promiscuous woman during my formative years and I’m in this fix because of it. This is your fault.”

²⁴⁴ Tiefer, in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 167.

The housekeeper, Flor (Vega), is a cheerful and pretty young Mexican woman, who quickly bonds with the family, though she does not know quite how to deal with Leoni. In contrast to Leoni's character, Vega exudes kindness and peace. She represents the ideal of the traditional homemaker who lovingly manages the home and keeps the family together.²⁴⁵ The message embedded is that a traditional woman would bring stability to the household and serve as a positive model for the whole family. She finds herself dismayed by Sandler's tears and likens him to a Mexican woman, but conversely they also appeal to her because it shows his sensitivity. When she asks for his advice about allowing her daughter to attend the private school because she is worried about how it will affect the child he replies that, "Worrying about your children is sanity." Her position in the household allows her to hear and see the family's interactions and slowly she begins to fall in love with Sandler, but she also realizes his untenable position. He is between the proverbial rock and the hard place, because while he has grounds aplenty to leave his wife, he does not want to hurt his children. In the end, she does the honorable thing and leaves the family's employ and removes her daughter from the private school.

The key messages in the film are that good fathers often sacrifice their personal happiness in order to hold their families together; that hyper-materialism is paid for by being absent from the family; and that illness upsets the normalcy in any household. The film also shows that money does not guarantee happiness, and good communication skills are vital to maintaining good relationships.

²⁴⁵ Wood, 4th ed.,55-56.

There is some disagreement among scholars about the term ‘crisis of masculinity,’ but it seems to apply to Sandler’s character in *Spanglish*.²⁴⁶ He is distraught over having to maintain his four-star rating as a restaurateur, his wife admits to having an affair, and his sex life has been unfulfilling even before that. Not only is his marriage in crisis, which calls his masculinity into question, if he loses the Best Chef distinction it will be another blow to his masculine identity. The film also displays the crisis affecting masculine identity which largely goes unnoticed by society: that of illness – physical or mental.²⁴⁷ Whether the husband or his wife is sick, the problems arising at home create a paradigm shift for his masculinity. If it is his illness, he must figure a way to maintain his manhood, not just his maleness. If the illness belongs to his wife, he takes on her responsibilities in addition to his own. *Spanglish* brings to light all of these elements men face: pressure to succeed as a breadwinner, breakdown of the traditional family, long-term illness, and hyper-materialism, not to mention the temptation to succumb to the lure of a pretty young woman who does not bring the same kind of problems that one is currently experiencing.

Spanglish is set in Los Angeles which offers some unique challenges to both women and men: physical appearance, designer clothing, expensive cars and homes, and the challenge to be seen as prosperous. This puts particular stress on males, who must appear to be successful in their breadwinner roles. Sandler’s character is forced

²⁴⁶ Thomas Winter, “Crisis of Masculinity,” in Carroll, 117-118

²⁴⁷ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, “The Story of ‘I’: Illness and Narrative Identity,” in *Narrative 10:1* (Jan. 2002), 9-27. Ohio State University Press. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107270>. Accessed 5/5/2014.

to work long hours partly due to the nature of the restaurant industry and partly in order to maintain the finances for an unemployed Leoni's hyper-materialism, which is seen in the home's décor, the private school, and the beach house. The traditional female role of the Mexican housekeeper draws Sandler and his children, which Leoni begins to interpret as competition. Through Sandler's interactions with Vega he becomes increasingly attracted to her traditional values and common sense. This implies a basically conservative gender message, one that upholds conventional paternal authority and domesticity, and which is consistent with Mexican culture where the woman is the heart of the home. Yet she tells him that, "I have never known a man who can put himself in my place like you do. How did you become that man?" Again, this speaks to the difference between definitions of masculinity in the two cultures, and reveals the influence of feminism on American males.

Sandler's character's biggest problem appears to be his inability to communicate with adults, including his wife. When a restaurant employee refuses to listen to his point about making room for more customers, Sandler's response is to yell, "Do this for me or I'll set my hair on fire and start punching myself in the face!" This implies that he does not command respect as the leader of his team. His lack of communication with his wife has created a rift so large that it might not be healed. Even his communication with Vega is halting, not due to the language barrier, but to his own uncertainties. The only people with whom he seems to communicate well with are his children, who are not yet teenagers. This is a common problem according to scholar Samuel Osherson, who states that an astonishing number of men

do not feel confident in their manhood, even though they are successful in their work and home lives. These men often perceive their loneliness and desire for better relationships as an indication of personal failure and inadequacy. Failure may lead to withdrawal, and withdrawal to loneliness, as men try to work through their problems independently. By rejecting opportunities to connect with others who could help negotiate the situation, they increase their sense of isolation.²⁴⁸ What Sandler's *Spanglish* character lacks, then, is a homosocial mentoring relationship which could lend him the emotional support he needs.

The crisis of fatherhood that Sandler finds himself in is what prompted the largest and earliest debate over men's rights during divorce proceedings.²⁴⁹ The question he faces is this: does he try to take his children away from his neurotic wife and her alcoholic mother and then attempt to run his restaurant as a single parent, or does he stay in the destructive relationship so that he can at least be a good breadwinner and hope she does not destroy him and his children in the process? He must choose between his personal happiness and his fatherhood role: if he saves himself by divorcing her, will she continue to undermine their daughter's self-image, or worse, without him as a buffer? There is no perfect answer.

Spanglish provides no real answers, only glimpses into the lives of people who are struggling to be good parents. The contrast between the dysfunction of Sandler's wealthy household and the danger Leoni represents to her husband and

²⁴⁸ Samuel Osherson. *Wrestling With Love: How Men Struggle With Intimacy With Women, Children, Parents, and Each Other*. (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 14.

²⁴⁹ Calinda Lee, "Fathers' Rights," 166-168 and Carroll, "Divorce," both in Carroll, 131-133.

children, versus the warmth and caring of the lower-income Mexican family and Vega as a single motherhood makes an important statement to the audience: money does not guarantee happiness. There are some humorous moments in it, but the key themes in *Spanglish* are serious reflections regarding culture and manhood, communication, fatherhood, and mental illness.

Examples of Masculinity in *The Waterboy*

The Waterboy (1998) was Sandler's fifth starring role, and in it he plays thirty-one-year-old Bobby Boucher, Jr., who is developmentally delayed and a victim of his father's desertion of the family.²⁵⁰ As a result of dad's desertion his mother has held Bobby much too close for him to develop into manhood. Bobby served as the waterboy for a fictional Louisiana University football team for eighteen years, where he was constantly insulted and bullied by the players. When fired by the head coach, Red Beaulieu, who calls him a moron and unjustly accuses him of disrupting the team, Bobby visits the state college to inquire whether he can serve as their team's water boy. Once again, most of the players treat him contemptuously, with only one player and the coach treating him with kindness and respect, and because he has been forced to suppress his anger for so long he needs an outlet to rid himself of it. When one team member spits in the clean drinking water, Bobby disassociates from the moment, seeing the faces of different people - his mother, Beaulieu, other bullies - who have victimized him, and furiously tackles the player. Coach Klein, whose own manhood has been frustrated by his team's very long losing streak, and by Beaulieu's

²⁵⁰ Jessica Weiss, in *A Shared Experience*, ed. McCall and Yacovone, 350-351. Also, Bly, 72. Also, Gerzon, 157, 162, and 166.

theft of his old playbook, recognizes Bobby as a tool to help him recoup his success. When Klein asks Mama if Bobby can play football, she tells him that her “boy is too delicate,” thereby further demasculinizing him. Sandler speaks up and tells her he is tired of everybody calling him a dummy and of not having any friends. As the coach is leaving Mama’s house he quietly tells Bobby that “What Mama don’t know won’t hurt her.” Bobby then chooses to sneak off, attend college, play football, and secretly see a girl (Vicky Vallencourt). Each day, through both homosocial interaction at school, and heterosexual interaction with Vicky, he becomes a little more manly by adopting masculine traits.²⁵¹

Coach Klein encourages Bobby to think about the people who have been mean to him, to channel his repressed rage, use that as tackling fuel, and then employs it against the opposition. The team is so successful with Bobby’s aggressive playing that they are eventually positioned to play against the team coached by Bobby’s and Klein’s old nemesis, Red Beaulieu. Klein is compelled to finally design some new plays, which gives his team the edge for the win, and thus he regains his manhood.

The film culminates with Bobby and Vicky marrying, and as they settle on his lawn mower to ride off into the sunset Mama tells him, “You go on, have some fun becomin’ a man.” Consequently, Bobby achieves manhood through adopting masculine behaviors,²⁵² through the mentoring provided by Coach Klein, by defeating

²⁵¹ Kimmel, in *Theorizing Masculinities*, Brod and Kaufman, ed., 129.

²⁵² Gerzon, 3.

the bullies,²⁵³ through athletic involvement and learning to function as part of a homosocial team,²⁵⁴ and by marrying Vicky. The physical strength of Sandler's character and the championship football team suggests to the audience that physical prowess and power are two key measures of manhood, but it also shows this to be most successful in society when it is accompanied by moral integrity, which is demonstrated by both Klein's and Sandler's kindness and honesty.

The film's main character is Bobby Boucher Jr., (Adam Sandler), whose facial contortions make him look mentally challenged, and to illustrate this, instead of driving a car, he rides a lawnmower into town. He has been an adult for over a decade, but his mother treats him as if were a boy, and though he loves her, he feels smothered by her control.²⁵⁵ Because Bobby has lacked a father figure in his life, his emotional and masculine maturation have been stunted and his arrested development and unformed masculinity are clearly recognized to be the result of his mother's domination. In most of his films Sandler plays the dominant character, but in *The Waterboy* he is perceived as a weakling and is dominated by nearly everyone. He is perpetually insulted by 'normal people,' but Bobby has been trained by his mama not to get angry, so he just takes the punishment without showing his rage.²⁵⁶ The coach teaches Bobby to release his anger in a constructive manner, and then in a parallel to Bly's *Iron John* myth, Bobby steals the key to his manhood from his mother by

²⁵³ Kimmel, in Kaufman and Brod, 128.

²⁵⁴ Kimmel, in *Manhood in America*, 137 and Gerzon, 155-156.

²⁵⁵ Gerzon, 165-167. Also Bly, 72.

²⁵⁶ Stearns and Stearns, *Anger*, 219-220. Also Gerzon, 193.

standing up to her.²⁵⁷ She has told him and others that he is not “college material,” but proving he is not “a dummy,” he passes his high school equivalency exam so that he can play in the championship game. Sandler’s character is representative of the mythopoetic model of achieving manhood and he gradually matures into a form of it. During the final game between the arch rivals, the commentators show a close-up of Bobby’s face during an instant replay, one of them states that there is “a lot of pain and shame in his eyes,” harking back to Bly’s theories.²⁵⁸ The audience is left to wonder if he will be able to finish college and if he can achieve some level of normalcy as a married man as time goes on.

Helen, ‘Mama’ Boucher, is a lonely, over-protective, single mother who frustrates Bobby’s desire to play football and interferes with his maturation into normalcy and manhood. She is an extremely overbearing Cajun woman, living in the swamp with her boy. When her husband deserted the family, she was forced to provide for the two of them, which meant scouring the swamp for food – giant snakes, alligators, catfish, and frogs. She is desperate to keep her adult son from growing up and leaving home. Anything she does not want him to know about “is from the devil,” especially girls like Vicky Vallencourt. The film is a strong commentary on what occurs when male children have no father or male mentor, “the combination of too much mothering and inadequate fathering which leads to

²⁵⁷ Bly, 251.

²⁵⁸ Mythopoetic groups of males met for weekend-long retreats where they could freely express emotions in order to release pain and shame. Bly believes that not having a father figure in their lives to help them grow into successful manhood causes men to doubt themselves and to make wrong choices.

insecurity in male identity.”²⁵⁹ In an effort to make herself more acceptable, she has told her son that his father was a Peace Corps volunteer who died in the Sahara desert due to lack of water. However, Robert Sr. actually went to New Orleans to find a job and decided never to go back to the swamp. Whenever Bobby stands up to Mama she fakes an illness in order to achieve his compliance. While in the hospital, preventing him from playing in the big game, she admits that she lied about what happened to his father. In her new role as mother to an adult, she helps him get to the game, serves coffee to the inebriated cheerleaders so they can cheer her boy on, and is even supportive of his relationship with Vicky Vallencourt.

Vicki Vallencourt is Bobby’s romantic interest and stimulus to heterosexual masculine maturation. She is a tough, sexy young woman who has been to jail, and encourages him to pursue his dream of attending college and playing football, and she is willing to confront Mrs. Boucher. Bobby’s attraction to Vicky becomes the most compelling reason for him stand up to “Mama.” Her more aggressive and masculine actions communicate that she will take care of him,²⁶⁰ but when Vicky makes sexual advances toward him, Bobby becomes very anxious and he tells her she had better leave before his mama wakes up. She replies that she does not know why she wastes time with him because, “You ain’t even a man.” Vicky serves as the dominant member in the gender-bending romance, while Bobby is feminized, due to his lack of sexual experience, and because he still lives at home as a dependent. After he stands

²⁵⁹ Joseph H. Pleck, “American Fathering in Historical Perspective,” in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael Kimmel (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 92.

²⁶⁰ Bly, 2-3.

up to his mama and passes his equivalency exam Vicky tells him, “Welcome to your manhood, Bobby.”

Coach Klein, played by Henry Winkler, mentors Bobby into manhood, and with Bobby’s help, seeks to bolster his own masculinity. The kindly Klein has experienced a long losing streak. This occurred after Coach Beaulieu from University of Louisiana physically intimidated Klein, stole his playbook, stole the job that should have been Klein’s, and then fired him. The loss of his job undercut Klein’s ability as a breadwinner and therefore his manhood, after which Klein became a whining, weak, and unstable individual.²⁶¹ After a confrontation with Beaulieu, Klein moans to Sandler, “I fled. I hid under my desk. I cried like a ten-year-old girl. Red took my playbook and my manhood. I knew what he was going to do and I just didn’t fight back.” Klein is clearly shown as de-masculinized, and his behavior speaks to the crisis of masculinity that men face when they lose something of particular value and are unable to replace it with something of equal or greater value; had Klein gained a better coaching position he would not have been so affected by the loss. Predictably, when the coach is able to formulate a couple of new plays, the team wins and Bobby tells him, “Mr. Coach Klein, you got your manhood back!” By using the designations of ‘coach’ and ‘mister,’ Bobby underscores Klein’s recovered manhood, both as coach and breadwinner. Although the coach spends most of the film in a defeated state, he mentors Bobby into being able to stand up for

²⁶¹ Roseanne Currarino, “Breadwinner Role,” in Carroll, 71-73.

himself by telling Bobby that he is a warrior and that it is okay to fight back.²⁶² The coach serves as an excellent example of Robert Bly's father-warrior figure who helps immature men achieve their manhood.

Perhaps *The Waterboy's* most important message is that boys need a male mentor, whether that is a father or another adult male who serves as a father figure, not just interaction with women, to help them reach successful manhood. According to Robert Bly, through every day events a mentor can guide a young man through countless experiences supporting him through his journey from boyhood into manhood.²⁶³ Scholar Don Conway-Long states, "Men need to 'do' something to become or be masculine; women though, naturally embody their own femininities."²⁶⁴ Conway-Long's argument is that the fashion in which men move, speak, express desire, and craft symbolical meaning creates a performance-oriented doctrine of what it means to be a man. In the film, both Coach Klein's mentorship and the homosocial friendship of one of the football players, help direct Bobby in his interactions with other people. These relationships help guide Sandler's character into something that begins to resemble manhood. But as per Sandler's customary message, he is able to perform these masculinities because he has a compelling reason to change: 'the one and only' who gives him a reason outside of himself to become a man.

The Waterboy attempts to highlight the problem of bullying behavior being accepted in sports and as previously mentioned, bullying is one of Sandler's key

²⁶² Bly, 150.

²⁶³ Bly, 233.

²⁶⁴ Don Conway-Long, "Ethnographies and Masculinities," in *Theorizing Masculinities*. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1994), 70-71.

themes.²⁶⁵ In this film his character is abused by nearly everyone, especially the football players and the fans in the bleachers. With only one exception, the film depicts college athletes as abusive to those who are weaker than they are and Sandler uses Coach Beaulieu to show abuse of power by a person in authority. Both represent models of masculinity that Sandler confronts and rejects explicitly to communicate the film's message: bullies, both physical and corporate, are bad.²⁶⁶ Once again though, in Sandler's make-believe world, bullies get their just rewards, with plenty of humiliation thrown in to hopefully teach young men that bullying is a negative form of masculine behavior and does not help achieve successful manhood.

Another of Sandler's key messages concerns masculinity and body image, and as usual, he gives us a glimpse at the 'regular guy' as champion. In a scene near the end of *The Waterboy*, a pathetic looking young man makes an appeal to Sandler to play in the big game, even though his mother is in the hospital, by saying, "I am not what you would call a handsome man. The good Lord chose not to bless me with charm, athletic ability, or a fully functional brain. You're an inspiration to all of us who weren't born handsome and charming and cool." Sandler uses his characters to offer up an attainable, rather than unrealistic, ideal of manhood, with an intended audience of the 'ordinary' guy.²⁶⁷ The ultimate message is that masculinity does not require charm, athleticism, or powerful intellect – three traits conventionally associated with successful masculinity — and is it another attempt by Sandler to

²⁶⁵ See page 58.

²⁶⁶ Kimmel, in Brod and Kaufman, 128.

²⁶⁷ Mishkind in Kimmel, *Changing Men*, 14.

demolish the hardbody myth. Once again, Sandler does not celebrate the ‘perfect’ bodies of the muscular football players, but instead highlights their athleticism as a possible detractor from building a healthy manhood.²⁶⁸

Another Sandlerian trope, the key to success is getting a college education, is shown through his educated characters’ successes and through the uneducated characters’ failures in most of his films. In *The Waterboy*, Bobby passes his high school equivalency exam with a high score because he studies intently for it so that he can continue to play football. Through education, Bobby is able to learn that his mama is wrong on many fronts and this helps him eventually confront her, win free of her control, and take authority in his own life, thus earning his manhood. Sandler’s message is not to prove that only educated men can be masculine, but that education may lead to better financial stability and may attract more intelligent female partners.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Glenn and Van Wert, 30.

CONCLUSION

According to scholar Julia T. Wood “Later generations of male feminists, including many men in their twenties today, attribute their feminism to parents and teachers who modeled egalitarian, non-sexist attitudes and practices.”²⁷⁰ This is the group that Adam Sandler and his cohorts hail from, the generation whose parents adopted, and adapted to, the liberal feminist stance of equality for the sexes. Sandler’s ideals are seen in the variety of male and female roles portrayed in his movies from female attorneys to house-husbands because gender equity and gender bending have been common throughout the life of Adam Sandler and his cohorts.

Second-wave liberal feminism also prompted American men to look at themselves, to search for their own identity, and to create a new definition for manhood.²⁷¹ Various men’s movements helped males begin to reiterate the importance of fatherhood to masculine identity, and they ascribed even more importance to the role than that emphasized by earlier generations.²⁷² This changed the landscape of child custody laws in America. At the same time, late twentieth century films began to engage manhood and fatherhood with new portrayals of both, and these popular culture vehicles helped the American men who watched them conceptualize their masculinity in new ways. Films became texts for normative

²⁷⁰ Wood, 9th ed., 83.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 88

²⁷² Calinda Lee in Carroll, 166-168.

behavior as men rethought their roles,²⁷³ and homosocial male relationships were re-emphasized as not just important, but vital, in the lives of men and the formation of their particular characteristics.²⁷⁴ The construction of masculinities in Sandler's popular films has helped, and continues to help, American males in this endeavor.

Adam Sandler's *Happy Gilmore* began a shift from the hardbody masculinity shown in popular films of the 1980s to a new genre of Dude Flicks which mocked these stereotypes.²⁷⁵ Additionally, second-wave feminism and LGBT culture have also been influential in encouraging men with patriarchal attitudes to reexamine their ideas and provided new opportunities for them to explore their internal dimension and redefine themselves. As Michael Kimmel states,

New role models for men have not replaced older ones, but have grown alongside them, creating a dynamic tension between ambitious breadwinner and compassionate father, between macho seducer and loving companion, between Rambo and Phil Donahue... Men are today developing a wider repertoire of emotions, seeking to express their feelings more deeply and with a wider range of women and men... We live in an era of transition in the definition of masculinity – what it means to be a real man - not, as some might fantasize, in which one mode comes to replace another mode, but in which two parallel traditions emerge, and from the tension of opposition between them a new synthesis might, perhaps, be born.²⁷⁶

This is exactly what Sandler and his Gen-X cohorts have demonstrated, and continue to demonstrate, in the masculine roles they have written and portrayed.

Both Sandler's serious films and his comedies contain social meaning and interpretations of masculinity, but his serious films provoke much more thought about

²⁷³ G. Turner, 112.

²⁷⁴ John Ibson, in Carroll, 278-281.

²⁷⁵ Alilunas, 2.

²⁷⁶ Kimmel, 9.

social issues such as mental illness and bullying. While his personal stance on masculinity has been influenced by feminism, he does not like showing his vulnerability with unmanly behavior such as crying, even on film, and prefers to deal with stressful situations by using jokes and clever remarks both on screen and off.

Adam Sandler's personal formation of masculinity began with emulating his father, whom he considers to be his mentor and hero, and he places the utmost importance on being a committed husband and father himself. His films are reflective of his views of American social issues, and most of them foreground issues of family dynamics, including fictive and fraternal kinships. The characters he portrays often trace the growth of a man-child into responsible manhood, as they adopt traditional, middle-class norms, and they are responsive to patriarchal authority and mentoring in order to achieve the successful transition. (One of his 2012 releases, *That's My Boy*, offers the audience a frightening and all too real look at the results of a man-child not attaining maturity and then attempting to parent.)

Sandler also greatly values the homosocial friendships that he has forged over time with his childhood friends, college buddies, and the comedians he worked with at *Saturday Night Live*. His films associate true manhood with commitment to others and with self-confidence, and his characters usually achieve a liberal female-sensitive model of masculinity through interactions with other mature males and with mature women. But in all cases, Sandler's model of masculinity appears attainable by the average male, partly because he seems so laid back and average himself, both on stage and off. Jack Giarraputo, Sandler's long-time friend and co-producer, reiterates

this, “We all know what it’s like to be a bit of a loser. I think our movies give our kids hope.”²⁷⁷

Additionally, the LGBT movement has had a significant impact on his thinking about masculinity, which is revealed in the treatment of LGBT people in his films. His tolerance and acceptance are a result of the national conversation surrounding gender that has been active throughout his life and has contributed to his “live, and let live” theory. In addition to confronting homophobia, his films also address other negative forms of masculine behavior, such as risk-taking, joking as a poor substitute for communication, and bullying, in order to influence the large number of American males who are trapped in extended adolescence.

Sandler and his cohorts attempt to create a product that has meaning and good values.²⁷⁸ This is important because audience members identify with characters and situations in the films and it allows Sandler’s masculinities to reach large numbers of American males.²⁷⁹ He also actively tries to sell homosocial friendships, fictive kinships in the absence of family support, and a traditional model of American manhood.

The subordination of women in Sandler’s films comes in the form of the women his characters use for casual sex before his transformation. Generally speaking, the women are attractive, physically well-endowed, and free with their sexual favors, however, these women do not hold his interest for long. Naturally, his

²⁷⁷ Schuman, 75. Quoting Karen S. Schneider, “Last Laugh,” *People*, November 30, 1998, <http://search.ebscohost.com/> (February 18, 2008).

²⁷⁸ Turner, 61.

²⁷⁹ Cousins.

love interest is an educated woman who demands his respect and that he change his immature behavior, with the exception of Vicky Vallencourt in *The Waterboy*. Vicky is the only person able stand up to “Mama,” but she too is pretty, sexually attractive, and helps Bobby man-up, just like all of his other love interests do. She, along with all of Sandler’s on-screen love interests, exemplify what is now being termed as third-wave feminist traits: “strength, empowered, eschewing victimization, and defining feminine beauty for themselves. [These women] shun artificial categories of identity, gender and sexuality.”²⁸⁰ Sandler’s love interest, ‘the one and only,’ carries the key role of reformer and she is necessary in his effort to reach manhood.

Scholar Gary Alan Fine states that “Masculinity is tied intimately to sexuality. Sexuality is organized around a gender axis; gender is perhaps the key organizing principle of sexuality. Gender informs sexuality, sexuality confirms gender.”²⁸¹ This relates to Sandler’s films because though he accepts LGBT options for others and does not deny their manhood, they generally reiterate traditional American concepts of gender roles, though these have been re-worked to fit various groups during various times. In other words, Sandler’s characters change with the times to fit a message that is relevant to his audience.

Adam Sandler is clearly much more than a comedian. He specifically chooses roles to advance his concepts of masculinity, manhood, and fatherhood and will continue to contribute to the ongoing national debate surrounding them as well as to

²⁸⁰ Rampton, 2-3.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 19.

be a proponent of the value of a strong family as he mentors generations of American males.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

ADAM SANDLER FILMOGRAPHY USED FOR THIS THESIS

Year	Title	Year of Story	Rated
1989	<i>Going Overboard</i>	Current	R
1995	<i>Billy Madison</i>	1994	PG13
1996	<i>Happy Gilmore</i>	1990S	PG13
1996	<i>Bulletproof</i>	1990	R
1998	<i>The Wedding Singer</i>	1985	PG13
1998	<i>The Waterboy</i>	Current	PG13
1999	<i>Big Daddy</i>	Current	PG13
2000	<i>Little Nicky</i>	Current	PG13
2002	<i>Punch-drunk Love</i>	Current	R
2002	<i>Eight Crazy Nights</i>	Current	PG13
2002	<i>Mr. Deeds</i>	Current	PG13
2003	<i>Anger Management</i>	Current	PG13
2004	<i>50 First Dates</i>	2004	PG13
2005	<i>The Longest Yard</i>	Current	PG13
2005	<i>Spanglish</i>	Current	PG13
2006	<i>Click</i>	Current	PG13
2007	<i>Reign Over Me</i>	2005	R
2007	<i>I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry</i>	Current	PG13
2008	<i>Bedtime Stories</i>	Current	PG13

2008	<i>You Don't Mess With the Zohan</i>	2008	PG13
2009	<i>Funny People</i>	Current	R
2010	<i>Grown Ups</i>	2008	PG13
2011	<i>Just Go With It</i>	Current	PG13
2011	<i>Jack and Jill</i>	Current	PG
2012	<i>That's My Boy</i>	Current	R
2012	<i>Hotel Transylvania</i>	Current	PG

APPENDIX B

STAN THE MAN LYRICS

From the Album: *Shhh...Don't Tell*

Born in nineteen thirty-five in Brooklyn, NY
Son of Anna and Phil
At nineteen years old he married my mother Judy
And immediately paid his first Bloomingdale's bill

Right away they started on a family
Three smart kids popped out of mom's tummy
But then one steamy night dad forgot to wear his raincoat
Nine months later out came the dummy

But he took care of me

Oh, 'Stan the Man' was my hero
The coolest guy ever, I swear
He stayed up all night making me a clay volcano
That's how I won the science fair

He was 6'2, 200 and 50 lbs.
And as sweet as he was strong
He was also known to be pretty well endowed
But believe me he didn't pass that one along

His fav'rite singers were Leon, Red Bone, and Johnny Cash
His favorite ball players were Kolfax and Micky
His favorite restaurant was the State's Delicatessen
His favorite movie was 'Little Nicky'

Sorry 'Godfather I and II'
Maybe next time

Yeah, 'Stan the Man' was my hero
With a golf swing that made me cry
He'd take their money and put it in his top dresser drawer
Then I'd steal it so I could get high...
But he ... beat that habit ... out of me

So Dad,
Thanks for letting me stay up late to watch Johnny Carson
Thanks for coaching all our games in Livingston Park

Thanks for telling me to always punch a kid in the face
If he made an anti-Semitic remark

Yeah, and don't worry 'bout Mom
We'll always look after her
Me, Scott, Val, Liz, and the grandkids
And when Jackie and I have children of our own
We'll try to raise them just the way you did

So say 'hi' to both my grandmas and grandpas
Tell my dog, Meatball, I miss him so
But most importantly, take advantage of being in heaven
And go _____ Marilyn Monroe
Mom said it's cool ... just wear a raincoat

Oh, 'Stan the Man' was my hero
Still is and always will be
'Cause he didn't give too much a crap about nothin'
Except loving his family

Well 'Stan the Man' is gone
But will always live on

APPENDIX C

AMERICAN THEATRE GROSS REVENUES

Released	Title	American Theatre Lifetime Gross
07/12/2013	Grown Ups 2	\$133,688,525
09/28/2012	Hotel Transylvania	\$148,313,048
06/05/2012	That's My Boy	\$ 36,931,089
11/11/2011	Jack and Jill	\$ 74,158,157
02/11/2011	Just Go With It	\$103,028,109
06/25/2010	Grown Ups	\$162,001,186
07/31/2009	Funny People	\$ 51,855,045
12/25/2008	Bedtime Stories	\$110,101,975
06/06/2008	You Don't Mess With the Zohan	\$100,018,837
07/20/2007	I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry	\$120,059,556
03/23/2007	Reign Over Me	\$ 19,661,987
06/23/2003	Click	\$137,355,633
05/27/2005	The Longest Yard	\$158,119,460
12/17/2004	Spanglish	\$ 42,726,869
02/13/2004	50 First Dates	\$120,908,074
04/11/2003	Anger Management	\$135,645,823
11/27/2002	Eight Crazy Nights	\$ 23,586,598
10/11/2002	Punch-drunk Love	\$ 17,844,216
06/28/2002	Mr. Deeds	\$126,293,452

11/10/2000	Little Nicky	\$ 39,464,775
06/25/1999	Big Daddy	\$163,479,795
11/06/1998	The Waterboy	\$161,491,646
02/13/1998	The Wedding Singer	\$ 80,245,725
09/06/1996	Bulletproof	\$ 21,576,954
02/16/1996	Happy Gilmore	\$ 38,824,099
02/10/1995	Billy Madison	\$ 25,588,734

Total American Theatre Lifetime Gross for films listed \$2,352,949,367.00
(not adjusted for inflation)

Total Worldwide Gross for films listed

\$3,779,600,000.00²⁸²

²⁸² “Adam Sandler Movie Box Office Results,” *Box Office Mojo*.
www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?id=adamsandler.htm. Accessed 2/21/2014.