# SENIOR THESIS

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Introduction

According to Biography.com, “The role of the TV mom has been evolving over the decades, reflecting not only network television standards, but also women's ever-changing position in the family, the workplace and society as a whole.” ¹

This paper seeks to examine the changing role of the television mom over a course of fifty years, from the 1960s to the present time. Over the past five decades, society’s view of motherhood has changed, beginning with the second wave of feminism in the 1960s when increased awareness was being given to the topic of women’s rights, to the 2000s with the occurrence of a sharp rise in the number of single-parent homes in the United States.

In her article, “The American Family on Television: From Molly Goldberg to Bill Cosby,” Muriel Cantor says, “By examining how families and family life on television have changed over time, we can identify the kinds of issues, messages and themes which are acceptable to majority audience.” ² By studying a popular television mom from each decade beginning with the 1960s until now, this paper will shed light on those changing societal themes, and reveal if and how the television moms selected exemplified them. The paper will examine the influence, if any, that each popular television mom had on society. Finally, the paper will also include a brief analysis of the parenting style exemplified by each television mom, and will discuss the typical outcomes that parenting style has on children.
The first section of this paper is the Methodology section, where reason is given for the selection of the specific popular television moms featured in this paper. The second section is an explanation of the four styles of child rearing, as defined by psychologists. The third and final section of the document is the analysis of the popular television moms themselves, including an investigation into their parenting style; an examination of the societal trends that were occurring in motherhood at that time and if that specific popular television mom reflected those trends; and finally, an overview of the influence, if any, that each popular television mom had on society.

Methodology

The popular television moms highlighted in this paper were all selected from a list on Biography.com. An entire section of that website is devoted to popular television moms. Prior to discovering Biography.com, the author had already selected several of the mothers that are profiled in this paper; however, the list on that site cemented the author's decisions and helped her select the remaining moms. As part of the selection process, the author did not investigate the awards history of the actresses who portrayed each popular television mom while in that role. The author simply selected from the list on Biography.com.

The goal of this paper was to find popular television moms who were distinctive in some way from the other popular television mothers of their decade. For example, one of the reasons Clair Huxtable has emerged as one of the most
popular television mothers of the 1980s is because of her race. Lorelai Gilmore is
notable not only because she was a single parent, but because of the parenting style
she displayed within that single parenthood.

This paper focuses on fifty years of motherhood on television because five
decades is a broad enough time span over which distinctive trends emerge. Thus, a
television mother was selected from the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s and
the 2000s. In some cases, the television shows featuring the mothers were aired
over a span of two decades. For example, The Brady Bunch aired from 1969-1974,
those cases, the author chose to focus the research on the decade which the show
most typified.

Four Styles of Child-Rearing

Three styles of child rearing have been defined by psychologist Diana
Baumrind: Authoritative child rearing, Authoritarian child rearing and Permissive
child rearing. Baumrind defined these styles as a result of her observations between
parents and their pre-school aged children. A fourth style of child rearing, known
as Uninvolved child rearing, was defined by Eleanor Macoby and John Martin, as a
result of their additional research on the subject. Macoby and Martin also helped to
further define Baumrind’s theories on child rearing styles. It is these four styles of
child rearing that are commonly accepted by both psychologists and society as the
defining styles of parenthood.
These four child rearing styles are based on three factors: Acceptance and Involvement, Control, and Autonomy Granting. The child rearing styles are characterized by how parents respond to each of these factors.6

Authoritative Child Rearing

Authoritative child rearing is characterized by a high degree of acceptance and involvement. Parents who exhibit the Authoritative child rearing style are very caring toward their children, and are very warm in their interactions with them. The parents care about building and maintaining close, fulfilling relationships with their children. Authoritative parents are attentive and responsive to their children. They are sensitive to their children’s needs, and are conscientious about meeting those needs. Authoritative parents are also very patient with their children.7

Authoritative child rearing is characterized by a moderate level of control. Authoritative parents exercise what psychologists consider to be a healthy form of control over their children. While they expect their children to exhibit mature, age-appropriate behavior, Authoritative parents give explanations for their expectations. When a child fails to exhibit mature behavior, Authoritative parents “use disciplinary encounters as ‘teaching moments’” 8 to help the child understand why he or she is being punished, and to learn from his or her mistakes. Authoritative parents explain why the child’s action was wrong in an effort to help the child learn.
Parents who practice the Authoritative child-rearing style “engage in gradual, appropriate autonomy granting,” according to Berk. Authoritative parents allow their children to make their own decisions as they become ready to do so. They do not push their children to make certain decisions that they are not ready to make.

When Authoritative parents and their children have disagreements, Authoritative parents facilitate a process of joint decision making, if it is possible to do so. In this sense, they continue to give their children some autonomy, yet also exercise parental control.

Just as parents who engage in the Authoritative child-rearing style encourage their children to make their own decisions in accordance with their readiness to do so, they also encourage their children to express their “thoughts, feelings and desires.” Authoritative parents provide their children with a safe, comforting, warm environment in which to express themselves.

Most psychologists consider the Authoritative parenting style to be the best form of parenting. According to Gray and Steinberg, “no large-scale systematic studies ever have indicated that nonauthoritative parenting has more beneficial effects on adolescent development than authoritative parenting, regardless of the population studied.”

Out of the four styles of child rearing, Authoritative parenting is known to have the most positive effects on children. According to Gray and Steinberg,
“Children who are raised in authoritative homes score higher than their peers raised in authoritarian, indulgent or neglectful homes on a variety of measures of competence, social development, self-perceptions, and mental health.”

Children who are raised by parents that practice Authoritative parenting typically obtain higher grades than children whose parents practice other forms of child rearing. This is due the high level of involvement the Authoritative parents have in their children’s education.

Because Authoritative parents are warm and caring to their children, yet still hold them to certain standards, they set a good example of “caring concern as well as confident, self-controlled behavior” for their children. This helps children raised in Authoritative homes learn how to exhibit those same behaviors in their relationships.

Children raised by Authoritative parents are better able to follow directions that are fair and reasonable. This is due to the fact that Authoritative parents set standards and give directions that are fair and reasonable to their children.

Children raised by Authoritative parents typically have higher levels of self-esteem, autonomy and maturity than children who are raised in non-authoritative homes. This is due to the fact that parents who practice Authoritative parenting encourage autonomy in correlation to a child’s abilities, and as a result, help build a child’s self-esteem. Children of Authoritative parents also have a greater sense of security than children who are not raised by Authoritative parents. This is due to
the fact that Authoritative parents attempt to protect their children from stresses that are going on in the family, and instead, strive to support them and be highly involved in their lives. Authoritative parents do not let familial stress impact their children’s lives.17

Children raised by Authoritative parents also show a greater resistance to peer pressure than children raised by parents who practice other forms of parenting. This is due to the fact that children raised by Authoritative parents have a greater respect for their parents and trust them and their advice; thus, they are more likely to pay attention to their parents’ rules and advice than children who are not raised by Authoritative parents.

Authoritarian Child Rearing

In contrast to Authoritative child rearing, the Authoritarian child rearing style is categorized by a low degree of acceptance and involvement, high levels of control and low levels of autonomy granting. Authoritarian parents are very cold toward their children. Instead of being warm and caring, like Authoritative parents, Authoritarian parents can be very rude to their children and in fact often reject their children. Whereas Authoritative parents enjoy paying attention to their children and supporting them, Authoritarian parents have no desire to support their children and instead, may degrade their children’s needs and desires.

Parents who practice Authoritarian child rearing exert high levels of control on their children. They expect a great deal from their children and often, they make
unrealistic and unnecessary demands of their children. Authoritarian parents often use physical force and forms of punishment to get what they want when their children do not obey them. According to Berk, Authoritarian parents “yell, command, criticize, and threaten” their children when attempting to exercise control over them. A common phrase used by Authoritative parents is “Do it because I said so!”

Authoritarian parents often take psychological control of their children. Authoritarian parents may psychologically and emotionally manipulate their children. Authoritarian parents often threaten to stop loving their children. They take actions that encroach on their child’s individuality as a means of getting the child to do what they want him or her to do, and as a way to take control of the child’s life. In short, Authoritarian parents attempt to “manipulate children’s verbal expression, individuality, and attachment to parents.”

Because Authoritarian parents want to have full control over their children’s lives, they often dismiss their children’s ideas, the choices they make, and their friends. Authoritarian parents also make their affection dependent on whether the child does what the parents want. Therefore, if the child does not fulfill the Authoritarian parent’s wishes, the parent tells the child that he or she will stop loving the child. Authoritative parents also take control over their children by holding extremely high expectations that are essentially impossible for the children to reach, due to their development level at that time.
Authoritarian child rearing is characterized by a very low level of autonomy granting. Authoritarian parents exercise high levels of control over their children, including controlling their autonomy. Authoritarian parents do not allow their children to make their own decisions. Instead, they make the decisions for the children, and they expect their children to accept the choices they make without question. Likewise, Authoritarian parents do not often listen to their children's perspectives on any topic. In Authoritarian parenting, it is the parent who is in control, and the child has no say in the matter whatsoever. Thus children of Authoritarian parents grow up having low levels of autonomy.22

Authoritarian parenting is known to have harmful effects on the children involved. Children of Authoritarian parents do not grow up feeling secure and happy; instead, they are “anxious, unhappy, and low in self-esteem and self-reliance.”23

Children of Authoritarian parents exemplify the model set for them by their parents. This manifests itself differently between boys and girls. When boys of Authoritarian parents become upset and do not get what they want, they become angry and aggressive, and may even become physically violent. When girls of Authoritarian parents are upset and do not get their way, they may engage in the same behavior as boys, but more often than not, they instead become more reliant on others. The girls usually fail to develop their own interests, and they become easily overwhelmed by difficult tasks.24
Children raised by Authoritarian parents generally do not do as well academically as their peers. These children also often have difficulty adjusting to new situations. For example, children raised by Authoritarian parents are often very fearful of new situations. When thrust into a new situation, these children often become very reserved, yet they remain defiant at the same time. They may even resort to physical violence and other aggressive behaviors as a result of the difficulty they feel in adjusting to the situation.\(^\text{25}\)

Children raised by Authoritarian parents rely heavily on their friends when it they must make important decisions. Since children raised by Authoritarian parents do not have good relationships with their own parents, they rely on their peers for help and guidance about such things as relationships and major life decisions. Children raised by Authoritarian parents are also likely to submit to peer pressure to make unhealthy choices.\(^\text{26}\)

*Permissive Child Rearing*

The Permissive style of child rearing is characterized by a high degree of acceptance but a low degree of involvement. As a result, parents who engage in Permissive parenting exhibit very low levels of control over their children, and display high levels of autonomy granting.\(^\text{27}\)

Like Authoritative parents, Permissive parents hold their children in high regard, and are very accepting of them. However, despite this warmth Permissive parents hold toward their children, they are either overindulgent or inattentive
toward their children. Unlike Authoritative parents, Permissive parents are not able to strike a balance between warmth and responsiveness to their children. Permissive parents either give their children almost everything they want, or they do not pay much attention to their children, allowing the children to do whatever they want to do.\textsuperscript{28}

Permissive parents exert very low levels of control on their children. They either make very few demands of their children, or they do not make any demands at all. Children raised by Permissive parents are allowed to do whatever they want to do, whenever they want to do it. For example, a child raised by Permissive parents may watch whatever television programs he or she wishes to view, and may go to bed whenever he or she wants to go to sleep. Permissive parents often do not regulate either one of those things. It is also unlikely that children raised by Permissive parents are ever required to complete such tasks as household chores, and they are usually not required to learn such things as manners. Permissive parents do not exert control over those areas of their children’s lives, and do not require their children to learn those things.\textsuperscript{29}

Permissive parenting is linked to high levels of autonomy granting. Whereas Authoritative parents give children autonomy in accordance with their level of skill and development, Permissive parents give their children full autonomy before the children are ready for such independence. As stated previously, children of
permissive parents are encouraged to make their own decisions about various topics without any help or encouragement from their parents.

Permissive parenting has been shown to have generally negative effects on children. Children raised by Permissive parents are typically very “impulsive, disobedient, and rebellious,” according to Berk. They do not follow rules and in fact often openly defy them. Children raised by Permissive parents are very demanding of adults and tend to rely heavily on them. These children typically have a low work ethic, and as a result, tend to perform poorly in school, often receiving low grades. Children raised by permissive parents are also very antisocial, but tend to rely on whatever friends they have for advice about life decisions. These children also often succumb to negative peer pressure.

Uninvolved Child Rearing

The fourth style of child rearing that has been identified by psychologists is Uninvolved child rearing. This style of parenting is categorized by low levels of acceptance and involvement, low levels of control, and an indifference to autonomy granting. Uninvolved child rearing is also often referred to as neglect.

Uninvolved parents are often dealing with personal issues, and as a result, are unable to care for their children. Parents who practice Uninvolved child rearing are often depressed and highly overwhelmed by the stresses of life, which causes them to be incapable of emotionally or physically caring for their children. Thus,
Uninvolved parents have a very low level of acceptance for their children, as well as a low level of involvement in their children’s lives.34

Due to the problems Uninvolved parents are typically dealing with, they lack the effort to exercise control over their children. This is similar to how Permissive parents treat their children. But whereas Permissive parents grant their children high levels of autonomy, Uninvolved parents do not care at all about their children’s decision making abilities or their children’s point of view.35

Uninvolved parenting has shown to have nothing but harmful effects on the children involved. When Uninvolved parenting begins early in a child’s life, it “disrupts virtually all aspects of development.”36 No matter the length of time in which children are exposed to Uninvolved parenting, there are negative consequences. Children raised by Uninvolved parents develop numerous emotional problems, including the inability to regulate their own emotions. These children also have difficulty performing well in school, and often do not achieve good grades. Children raised by Uninvolved parents often exhibit antisocial behaviors, and do not interact well with others. 37

Because children raised by Uninvolved parents cannot rely on their parents for care and assistance, they often turn to their friends, if they have them, for help and guidance on such topics as “their personal lives and future.”38 However, children raised by Uninvolved parents are also highly likely to give in to negative peer pressure.39
The Popular Television Moms

The 1960s: Laura Petrie

Laura Petrie is one of the most popular television moms of the 1960s. Actress Mary Tyler Moore played the character on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* from 1961-1966.

Motherhood in the 1960s was based on the idea that the role of both the woman and the woman as a mother was beginning to change, an idea brought about the feminist movement. The 1960s brought about the start of the second wave of feminism, which was characterized by women’s desires “for greater equality across the board, e.g., in education, the workplace, and at home.”

In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded. According to Verta Taylor, in her article, “Social Movement Continuity: The Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” “NOW brought together labor union activists, government employees, and longtime feminist activists and took leadership of the liberal branch of the [feminist] movement.” In doing so, NOW became a driving force in the second wave of feminism.

Although she did not do so drastically, Laura Petrie exemplified the changes in society’s views of both women and motherhood. Unlike some of the mothers that will be examined in this paper, Laura remained mostly true to society’s view of the traditional mother. She did not work outside the home; instead, she oversaw her
home and served as a loving wife to her husband, Rob (played by actor Dick van Dyke) and mother to her son, Ritchie (played by actor Larry Matthews).

Laura practiced the Authoritative style of parenting. She was very loving to Ritchie, yet was not afraid to punish him when he did wrong. For example, in the episode, “Where You Been, Fassbinder?” Laura sent Ritchie to bed early for asking a guest an inappropriate question. Laura exhibited high levels of involvement in Ritchie’s life are another characteristic of authoritative parenting. An example of this is found in the episode, “A Show of Hands,” in which Laura placed her hands in a pot of black ink in order to dye a costume Ritchie needed for a school play. The close relationship Laura had with her son, and the level of security he felt from her, was also evidenced in the fact that Ritchie came to her for advice, such as in the episode, “Girls Will Be Boys,” when Ritchie came to Laura (and Rob) for advice on how to get a girl to stop hitting him.

In all respects, Laura was “a lovely and competent housewife,” as McLeland put it. In fact, in 1965, *Time* magazine called her “TV’s favorite average housewife.” However, despite the fact that Laura was a committed housewife and homemaker during a time when the feminist movement was beginning to grow in strength and numbers, she still reflected an aspect of feminism, and the influence she had on society cannot be discounted. The biggest way in which Laura Petrie exemplified the feminism of the 1960s was in her choice of dress.
Although women had been wearing pants before the 1960s, prior to that time television often depicted mothers as wearing dresses or skirts. Although women did wear pants on television, it was often the exception to the rule. However, Laura Petrie changed that stereotype when she began wearing Capri pants, a style of pants, often tight, that are cut at the mid-calf.\textsuperscript{47}

According to TVAcres.com, “Since Laura spent most of her time at home ... it was only practical for her to flaunt the casual look.”\textsuperscript{48} By wearing the pants, Laura started a fashion revolution. According to \textit{Time} magazine, the fact that Laura wore the pants “helped make Capri slacks the biggest trend in U.S. casual attire.”\textsuperscript{49} The pants became her trademark and served as a slight nod to the second wave of feminism that was occurring in the United States at that time.

Laura Petrie both reflected changes that were occurring in society during the years that \textit{The Dick Van Dyke Show} aired and helped to bring about change. In the process, she became one of the most popular television moms in history. In 1965, \textit{Time} magazine called her “America’s favorite TV housewife.”\textsuperscript{50} Although Laura’s influence on specific styles of motherhood was minimal, her influence on women in society was major, with the fashion trend she started when she promoted the popularity of Capri pants. The character’s popularity was evidenced by the fact that Moore was nominated for three Emmy awards for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series (in 1963, 1964 and 1966) and won the trophy twice (in both 1964 and 1966) for her performance in the role; she was also was recognized with a Golden
Globe award for Best TV Star – Female in 1965. According to The Museum of Broadcast Communications, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, “more than any other social document, ... managed to operate largely contemporaneously with the New Frontier and the thousand days of the Kennedy presidency .... [A]ll the hallmarks of the Kennedy zeitgeist are somewhere in attendance: Laura as the Jackie surrogate, attired in capris pants and designer tops.”

*The 1970s: Carol Brady*

Carol Brady is one of the most popular, if not the most popular television mom from the 1970s. She is also one of the most popular television moms of all time. Carol Brady was played by actress Florence Henderson on *The Brady Bunch* from 1969-1974.

Motherhood in the 1970s was similar to motherhood in the 1960s. The second wave of feminism was still going strong, although it had begun to mellow. The different factions of feminism – the radical movement and the more conservative feminists – were beginning to unite, which helped the movement become calmer, although its underlying intensity was still there. According to Barbara Ryan, in her article, “Ideological Purity and Feminism: The U.S. Women’s Movement from 1966-1975,” “by the mid-1970s, initial disputes had given way to a broad consensus on major feminist issues such as equal rights, reproductive freedom, and sexual orientation. In addition, the different sectors were expressing similar definitions of feminism: a belief in women’s equality with high regard for women’s values.”
While feminists did not discount the importance of motherhood, the feminist movement did place much emphasis on the fact that it was good for women to have higher aspirations than just being a wife and mother. In the 1970s, the emphasis placed on the importance of motherhood changed, more so than it did for Laura Petrie in the 1960s. Thorton and Young-DeMarco emphasize the fact that family life was still important in the 1970s; however, the emphasis came to be on thinking for oneself about the matter, instead of simply following society because it was the traditional thing to do.\textsuperscript{54}

According to Thorton and Young-DeMarco, the 1960s and 1970s “witnessed far-reaching changes in people’s attitudes and values concerning gender roles, marriage, divorce, childlessness, premarital sex, and out-of-wedlock childbearing.”\textsuperscript{55} There were “strong reductions in emphasis on obedience to previously accepted societal standards of behavior. The trend in these years [the 1960s and 1970s] was toward a reduction in the strength of the prescriptions and proscriptions concerning specific dimensions of family life.”\textsuperscript{56}

Although marriage, having children and putting effort into a family life were still valued by society in the 1970s, according to Thorton and Young-DeMarco: “Specific dimensions of these general trends were the weakening of social prescriptions concerning the necessity of marrying and staying married, having children, and limiting sexual expression and childbearing to marriage.”\textsuperscript{57}
Besides feminism, some other popular trends that began to occur in society in the 1970s were divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and the rise in popularity of birth control devices. According to Arland Thorton and Linda Young-DeMarco,

“A century-long increase in divorce accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s. The reported incidence of premarital sex, nonmarital cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock childbearing also increased dramatically during this period .... Another important event during this period was the introduction of the birth control pill and other effective contraceptives.”

These changes in behavior came hand in hand with changes in attitudes regarding family.

Carol Brady modeled the Authoritative parenting style on her six children. Carol maintained the balance between being loving and supportive, but also never missed a teachable moment and was not afraid to discipline her children when they did wrong. For example, in the episode, “Bobby’s Hero,” Carol became concerned when Bobby (played by actor Mike Lookinland) developed an admiration for the murderer, Jesse James. As a result, she and her husband, Mike (played by actor Robert Reed), contacted a man whose father was killed by James in an attempt to help Bobby understand the truth about his “hero.” In the episode, “Greg Gets Grounded,” Carol and Mike revoked Greg’s (portrayed by actor Barry Williams) car privileges for a week because he was almost in a car accident due to irresponsible driving.
Carol was also a very loving and encouraging mother, such as in the episode, “Law and Disorder,” in which she helped Bobby become an excellent school hall monitor, despite his initial disappointment at being named to the position. In “The Show Must Go On,” Carol assisted Marcia (played by actress Maureen McCormick) and bonded with her daughter by performing with Marcia in her school variety show.

The Brady Bunch emphasized traditional family values. According to Sean Griffin, “In an era in which situation comedies emphasized how social climes were changing, The Brady Bunch was one of the few series that hearkened back to the traditional family values seen in such sitcoms as Leave it to Beaver and Father Knows Best.”

Instead of reflecting the changing attitudes and beliefs that were beginning to develop in society regarding marriage and families during the 1970s, The Brady Bunch reflected traditional views of marriage and family. Despite the fact that creator and executive producer, Sherwood Schwarz, wanted Carol to be a divorcee, network executives would not allow it. Thus, although the show made it clear that husband Mike was a widower, Carol’s first husband was never referenced, besides the fact that her maiden name and surname were mentioned in the show’s pilot episode. According to Sean Griffin, “Although ... episodes of the first season [of The Brady Bunch] did deal with the problems of children getting used to a new
mother or father, the half-hour show repeatedly and firmly upheld the family as a tight unit of support, love and understanding.”

Despite the feminism that was still occurring during the time *The Brady Bunch* aired, the show never reflected or depicted it. Instead,

“The Brady Bunch tried to steer clear of the political and social issues of the day. Rarely were non-white characters introduced into the series. Women’s liberation and gender equality were boiled down to brother-sister in fighting. The counterculture ... was represented in random minor characters portrayed as buffoons – or in [oldest son] Greg trying to impress a girl with hippie jargon.”

According to Bio.com, Carol Brady is a “Favorite TV Mom” of the 1970s. In 2007, Henderson and the rest of the cast of *The Brady Bunch* were recognized with the Pop Culture Award at the TV Land Awards. However, she did not become a favorite television mom by reflecting any radical societal change, or by starting any major fashion trends. Instead, she did so simply by being a loving, Authoritative mother. In doing so, she steadfastly upheld traditional family values. According to Griffin, “A cultural throwback even in its time, the family led by a ‘lovely lady’ and ‘a man named Brady’ has become celebrated in part precisely for its steadfast obliviousness to societal change.”

*The 1980s: Clair Huxtable*

Arguably the most popular television mom of the 1980s was Clair Huxtable, played by actress Phylicia Ayers-Allen, later Phylicia Rashad on *The Cosby Show* from 1984-1992. Rashad earned two Emmy award nominations (in 1985 and 1986)
for her work on the show, although Clair’s popularity was due in part to the fact that *The Cosby Show* was a groundbreaking series. The show broke both racial and social barriers by depicting an African-American family in a way that had not been seen on television up to that point.

The impact Clair Huxtable had as a television mom had less to do with feminism and more to do with her race. Although Clair was a strong woman with a career, which will be discussed further, her influence did not come as a result of any feminist ideologies that were present in *The Cosby Show*. Instead,

> “*The Cosby Show* revolved around the day-to-day situations faced by [husband] Cliff … [played by actor Bill Cosby] and Clair Huxtable … and their five children. This family was unlike other black families previously seen on television in that it was solidly upper-middle-class – the Huxtables lived in a fashionable Flatbush brownstone, the father was a respected gynecologist, and the mother a successful attorney.”

Clair reflected the popular societal trend of the 1980s of people who wanted to get married, stay married, have children and put effort into a family life. According to Thorton and Young-DeMarco, “Most Americans in the mid-1980s said that a good marriage and family life were very important to them. They planned to marry, were optimistic about their marriages being durable, saw parenthood as fulfilling, and planned to bear and raise children.” Clair and Cliff Huxtable reflected this societal trend. As Cantor put it, “the Huxtables [were] often shown in their double bed and clearly [had] sexual relationships which they enjoy[ed] …. Cliff and Clair Huxtable … [would never] consider adultery and/or divorce. [Their marriage was] for keeps.”
Like Carol Brady, Clair Huxtable modeled the Authoritative parenting style. She was highly involved in the lives of all five of her children, and was both loving and firm when the situation warranted it. For example, in the episode, “Theo and the Joint,” when Clair found a joint in one of son Theo’s (played by actor Malcom-Jamal Warner) textbooks, she and Cliff confronted him about it. When Theo adamantly denied that the joint was his, Clair believed him. In “Bon Jour Sondra,” Clair was supportive and encouraging of her eldest daughter (played by actress Sabrina Le Beauf) when she announced that she wanted to spend the summer with some friends in Paris. In the episode, “Theo’s Holiday,” Clair and Cliff tried to teach Theo a lesson about money by helping him gain a greater understanding of what life is like in the real world.

In general, however, while Clair Huxtable is known as a “Favorite TV Mom,” for her Authoritative parenting style, Clair’s impact on society was much more far-reaching than just her parenting methods. The fact that she was African American is a large reason why her influence was so important. Clair presented a new picture of the African American mother. For starters, Clair was not just a mother who worked outside of the home – she had a career as a successful lawyer. And although Clair’s career did not have a huge presence in the show, it was there, despite the fact that it came secondary to her family.

According to Julia T. Wood in her article, “Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender,” “Prime-time television favorably portrays pretty,
nurturing, other-focused women, such as Claire Huxtable ... whose career as an attorney never entered storylines as much as her engagement in family matters.” However, simply the fact that Clair was an African American, a woman, and an attorney broke societal boundaries and presented the African American woman in a new light, as someone being able to manage a career, a marriage and a family life including children.

The Huxtables redefined the depiction of the African American family on television, which only served to increase Clair Huxtable’s popularity. According to Hunt, “TV Guide compared the Huxtable’s lifestyle to that of other black families in America and described the family as the most ‘atypical black family in television history.’” They were an example of an African American family living in affluence. The Huxtables placed much emphasis on education. The Huxtables were also unashamed of their racial heritage, and it played a role in the show. The Cosby Show marked the first time that an African American family was presented in that light on television. These distinctions were an intentional element of the show both during its development before it aired and during production when the show was on television:

“In many respects, The Cosby Show and its ‘classy’ aura were designed to address a long history of black negative portrayals on television .... [T]he Huxtables were given a particular mix of qualities that its creators thought would challenge conventional black stereotypes. These qualities included: ... a strong nuclear family; parents who were professionals; affluence and fiscal responsibility; a strong emphasis on education; a
multigenerational family; multiracial friends; and low-key racial pride.”

Clair Huxtable’s popularity can not be overstated. Rashad earned two Emmy award nominations for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series (in 1985 and 1986) for her work on the show, although she never won the award. She did win the 1988 Image Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series and the 1989 People’s Choice Award for Favorite Female TV Performer for her work on the show.

However, Clair Huxtable is known as one of television’s most popular moms not necessarily for her parenting style, but for the influence The Cosby Show had on society. The show depicted an African-American family in a never-before seen light, and in doing so, changed perceptions of African-Americans. Clair’s multiple roles as a woman, wife, mother and lawyer helped change society’s views and helped to introduce society to a new way of seeing the African-American woman.

The 1990s: Annie Camden

One of the most popular TV moms of the 1990s was Annie Camden, played by actress Catherine Hicks on the family drama, 7th Heaven from 1996-2007. The show emphasized a return to traditional family values not often seen on television in the 1990s, a decade populated by shows such as the teen soap, Beverley Hills 90210, the popular and bawdy comedy, Sex and the City and the sitcom, That 70s Show.
7th Heaven aired during a time when divorce rates were beginning to rise and the family structure was beginning to change. Attitudes about divorce were changing, and the act was becoming more acceptable in society. According to Thorton and Young-DeMarco, “about four fifths of young people ... believe[d] that divorce [was] acceptable even if there [were] children in the family ... only one fifth of American adults [thought] that divorce [was] never justified.”

Single parenting, both as a result of divorce and as a result of children being born to unmarried mothers, also increased in popularity during the 1990s. However, “[a]t the same time ... the great majority of people continue[d] to believe that marriage [was] for a lifetime and should not be ended except under extreme circumstances,” according to Thorton and Young-DeMarco.

During the 1990s-2000s there was also an increase in the number of children being raised by gay and/or lesbian parents. According to Dew and Myers,

“existing research [concluded] t hat homosexual parents are not rare and that their number is increasing... Researchers have estimated that the number of gay or lesbian parents in the United States ranges from 2 million to 8 million, whereas estimates of children of gay or lesbian parents ranges from 4 million to 14 million.”

However, despite the changes that were going on in society regarding the importance of family and the family structure, 7th Heaven instead presented a traditional, nuclear family composed of a married mother and father and their five children. Not only were the Camdens a nuclear family unit, the father, Eric (played
by actor Stephen Collins) was also a Protestant minister. Annie was a pastor’s wife and the seven Camden children were “preacher’s kids.” This premise added additional depth to the show, and distinguished it from other family dramas of the time. The show did not reflect societal trends in family styles, similar to *The Brady Bunch* several decades earlier, but it did resonate with viewers, making Annie Camden a “Favorite TV Mom,” of the 1990s, according to Bio.com. In 2005 and 2006, Hicks and Collins were nominated for the Teen Choice Award for Choice Parental Unit.

According to Catherine Hicks, *7th Heaven*’s depiction of a nuclear family, which did not reflect societal trends during the time it aired, is exactly what made the show and her character popular. According to Bill Keveney of *USA Today*,

“Catherine Hicks ... says viewers appreciate ‘Heaven’ at a time when divorce and broken homes are commonplace on TV and in real life. ‘There was a hunger for a functional family. It’s comforting to see a family that will never break up,’ she says.”

Although *7th Heaven* did not reflect the changes occurring in family structure during the time that it aired, the show did feature episodes dealing with important issues that occurred in society over the years that it aired. Those issues included such topics as bullying; school violence; the genocide in Darfur; cutting; the treatment of Afghan women living under the Taliban regime; and the deaths of soldiers who fought in Operation Enduring Freedom. As a result, *7th Heaven* did reflect some of what was occurring in society during the years that it aired, but did not do so with regard to attitudes about family and family structure.
Annie Camden very much practiced the Authoritative parenting style, both on her biological children and on the foster children the Camdens hosted throughout the series. According to Melissa Marie Sneed in USA Today,

“While so many other television shows portray[ed] disinterested or self-absorbed parents, 7th Heaven dared to be different. The parents on the show ... were like real parents. They punished their kids for lying, breaking curfews and getting bad grades.”

For example, in the episode, “Red Tape,” Annie confronted her children about their lack of good manners. In “Drunk Like Me,” she restored an old car to give to son Matt, played by actor Barry Watson, when he moved into a fraternity house. A major story line in the show’s fifth season was Annie and Eric’s various attempts to help daughter Mary (played by actress Jessica Biel) who was arrested in the fourth season for vandalizing the school gymnasium, get her life back on track. Their efforts ultimately were unsuccessful. Finally, in the episode, “Bye,” Annie and Eric made the difficult decision to send Mary across the country to live with her grandparents, with the hope that they would be able to help her get her life back together.

Annie Camden was not just a one-dimensional character who was only focused on motherhood and family, however. While her life did revolve around her family, Annie also established herself outside the home. In the show’s fifth season, Annie began taking courses at a local college in an effort to continue her education. In the sixth season, she got a job outside the home teaching classes at
a local private school. As her children got older, she increasingly became involved in activities outside the home.

Despite the fact that she was a pastor’s wife, Annie was still a very relatable character. In addition to creating a life for herself outside her family, Annie struggled with things many people deal with. For example, she initially had much difficulty accepting the presence of her stepmother when her father remarried. In the sixth season, Annie went through menopause, which had an effect on both herself and her family. In the episode, “Who Knew?” Annie revealed that she experimented with marijuana when she was a young adult. These plot lines only served to make Annie more relatable with viewers, and increased her character’s popularity.

Overall, 7th Heaven did not reflect societal trends in marriage and parenting situations during the eleven years that it aired. According to Sneed, “all 7th Heaven did was try to encourage people to do the right thing.” Another thing that 7th Heaven did was provide viewers with an example of a strong nuclear family. In the words of its theme song, the show emphasized that “there’s no greater feeling/Than the love of a family.” The show emphasized this in every episode with another phrase from its theme song: “Where can you go/When the world don’t treat you right?/The answer is home.” That emphasis is exactly what made the show so popular, and why Annie Camden will be forever remembered as one of television’s most popular moms.
One of the most popular television moms of the 21st century was a mother who presented a very atypical picture of parenting: Lorelai Gilmore, played by actress Lauren Graham on the drama, Gilmore Girls, which aired from 2000-2007. While the show reflected societal trends in families and parenting, it also presented a very different picture of motherhood compared to what had been portrayed on television up to that time.

Gilmore Girls aired during a time of change in the structure of American families. Divorce rates were increasing and single parenting was on the rise. The show, which centered on a single mother, Lorelai, raising her teenage daughter, Rory, played by Alexis Bledel, reflected the rise of single parenting in society. However, where the show presented a different form of parenting lied in the fact that because Lorelai and Rory were only sixteen years apart, their relationship was based more on friendship than on authority. As Ron Wertheimer of The New York Times put it, Lorelai was in a “precarious position, stuck between unresolved adolescence ... and adult responsibility.”

Lorelai and Rory’s unique relationship was evidenced from the show’s first episode. The first on-screen interaction between the two characters occurred when Rory met her mother for lunch and asked for lip gloss. Lorelai promptly pulled a cosmetics bag out of her purse, named the four different candy-flavored lip glosses she had with her, and asked Rory which one she wanted. That single moment
was the first example of the unique parenting style depicted on *Gilmore Girls* – this mother and daughter were more than just mother and daughter. They were not separated by an authoritarian relationship held by the mother over the daughter. Instead, they were equals. According to Wertheimer, the show was about a “[m]other and daughter, still trying to grow up together.”

By definition, Lorelai was the mother and Rory was the daughter. However, those roles often existed in name only. As much as Lorelai parented Rory, Rory also parented Lorelai. Although Lorelai gave her daughter love, support and guidance, Rory gave those same things back to her mother. For example, in the episode, “The Road Trip to Harvard,” Rory confronted Lorelai about the real reasons behind her recently called-off engagement, despite the fact that Lorelai did not want to listen. As Wertheimer put it, “Rory ... must occasionally play the parent to her impetuous mother.”

Lorelai referred to this parenting imbalance in the episode, “Pilot,” during a situation in which she did exercise her parental authority: “We [Lorelai and Rory] always had a democracy in this house. We never did anything unless we both agreed. But now I guess I’m going to have to play the mom card.” In that specific situation, Lorelai was about to force Rory to transfer from public school to private school; however, before she could do so, Rory decided that she wanted to transfer schools in order to get the best education possible.
The balance of parenting power, or rather the lack of it, was something that made *Gilmore Girls* stand out from other television shows that have aired both before and after it. *Gilmore Girls* used something that was occurring in society, the rise of single parenting, and reconstructed it. Instead of the parent having the power in the relationship, there was a balance of power between the parent and the child. So while the show did reflect a societal trend, it also presented a unique interpretation of that trend.

Lorelai’s parenting style can be characterized as indulgent, yet also features characteristics of the authoritative parenting style. Lorelai was a relaxed, lenient parent, yet she was very committed to Rory and was heavily involved in her life and well-being. She gave Rory freedoms, yet remained involved in her life. For example, in the episode, “There’s the Rub,” Lorelai went away for the weekend, leaving Rory home alone. Instead of setting strict rules for Rory, Lorelai encouraged her to have a fun, relaxing weekend and invite friends to come visit. In “A Tale of Poes and Fire,” Lorelai encouraged Rory as she tried to select which college to attend, and decorated her room with Yale memorabilia when she decided to attend that University. In “A Messenger, Nothing More,” Lorelai expressed her disappointment when Rory slept with a married man, despite the fact that Rory did not want to listen to her mother’s views. When Rory finally did see the error in her ways, Lorelai was loving and supportive and did what she could to help her daughter fix the situation.
According to Ginia Bellafante in her article, “Mother and Daughter, Each Coming Into Her Own,” *Gilmore Girls* “existed as a rebuke to the striving parents of the overweight and merely average. This wasn’t the show’s intent, but it was certainly its effect, a televised delivery of inadequacy syndrome.”

Despite the fact that there are negative consequences to indulgent parenting, *Gilmore Girls* never depicted any of them. Instead, Rory was an intelligent young woman who loved school and excelled at it. She was the valedictorian of her graduating class and went on to attend Yale. Rory was well-liked by many and had a good reputation; for example, in the episode, “Bon Voyage,” the town selectman referred to her as the town’s “‘favorite daughter.’” When Rory did get into trouble in the fifth season of the series, it was because she was disillusioned about her prospects for a career after college, not because of unfit parenting.

If anything, *Gilmore Girls* glorified Lorelai’s single parenting, crediting it for helping Rory become an intelligent, successful, well-liked young woman. While Rory’s father was not constantly involved in her life, Rory was not any worse because of it and she did not suffer any negative effects from it.

However, in actuality, research shows that it is better for children to be raised in two-parent homes. Children who grow up in single-parent families are at greater risk for problems, such as social and psychological behavioral problems. They are also more likely to develop emotional problems than are children from two-parent families. Children from single-parent homes are often more worried
about things such as finances than are children from two-parent homes. Children from single-parent homes may feel neglected, both emotionally and financially, especially if one parent does not pay adequate child support.\textsuperscript{123}

Although \textit{Gilmore Girls} did reflect societal trends by revolving around a single parent and her child, the show did not accurately present the negative consequences that can occur as a result of single parenting. The show also presented parenting in a unique manner – as based on friendship between the parent and child, instead of a traditional balance of power held by the parent over the child. According to Bellfante, “the cultural significance of the show cannot be overstated. Nothing captured, or idealized, the new model of American parenthood – one based on friendship and shared tastes – quite like \textit{Gilmore Girls}.”\textsuperscript{124} Graham was nominated for a slew of awards for her work in the series, including a 2002 Golden Globe Award nomination for Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Series – Drama; a 2005 People’s Choice Award for Favorite Female Television Star; four Golden Satellite Award nominations for Best Performance by an Actress in a Series, Comedy or Musical; and two Screen Actors Guild nominations for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Drama Series.\textsuperscript{125} Graham won a Family Television Award for Actress in 2000; two Teen Choice Awards in 2005 and 2006 for Choice Parental Unit.\textsuperscript{126} In the process, Lorelai Gilmore became one of television’s most popular and most beloved moms. As Bellafante puts it, “[n]o mother in the history of television was ever cooler than Lorelai Gilmore.”\textsuperscript{127}
Conclusion

Although specific parenting styles have not changed greatly over the years, society’s view of parenting, specifically society's view of motherhood, has changed. As Cantor puts it, "In the past ... the mother was a housewife who was rarely shown doing any housework other than preparing meals.... In the sixties ... women with children were not depicted as having jobs whereas now TV mothers balance home and career with seemingly little effort. In recent years the ideal family has changed ...– now the mother is also a professional person.... What with showing more single-parent households, divorce, and other non-traditional patterns, the TV family [has] become less traditional."128

Some of the popular television moms discussed in this paper reflected society’s changing view of motherhood at the time their show aired. Although Laura Petrie remained true to the traditional view of the mother, she also offered a slight nod to feminism when she popularized Capri pants. Carol Brady's distinction lied in the fact that she did not in any way reflect the feminism that was occurring in the 1970s. Clair Huxtable was notable for the fact that she helped to break racial boundaries and present an affluent African American woman who maintained a balance between family life and career. Annie Camden presented a strong, caring mother in a nuclear family at a time when divorce was on the rise and families were increasingly beginning to fall apart. And Lorelai Gilmore not only reflected the rise of single parenting, she displayed a unique type of single parenting – one based on friendship and shared interests.
Television’s depiction of motherhood continues to change to this day. The show, *Parenthood*, a drama currently on the air, is a good example of those continuing changes. The show focuses on a married couple, their four adult children, and their grandchildren. The show features several different portrayals of motherhood. For example, female matriarch, Camille Braverman, played by actress Bonnie Bedelia, tries to maintain the peace in her family and support her adult children and grandchildren while also attempting to develop her own life.\textsuperscript{129} Daughter Julia Braverman-Graham, played by actress Erika Christensen, is a successful lawyer who tries to maintain the balance between work and family.\textsuperscript{130} Daughter Sarah Braverman, played by actress Lauren Graham, is a single mom whose life has taken some unexpected turns; thus, she has moved back in with her parents in an effort to create a new life for her teenage children.\textsuperscript{131} Daughter-in-law Kristina Braverman, played by actress Monica Potter, is “a constant source of stability and support for anyone who needs it, is a wise, and quietly forceful woman who loves her husband and children deeply and with incredible strength,”\textsuperscript{132} and is deeply committed to her family.\textsuperscript{133}

Television portrayals have motherhood have changed over time, and they will continue to change. These changes may either reflect or reject the societal views of motherhood at the time a specific television show airs. But whether they reflect those views or not, they can continue to serve as topics of analysis and serve as a commentary made by the creators of a show on the society in which we live.
End Notes


4 Darling and Steinberg


7 Berk 279

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12 Gray and Steinberg 575

13 Gray and Steinberg 574

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“Pants.”

“Television: How to Succeed Through Married.”


Thorton and Young-DeMarco 1011

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66 Griffin

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73 Cantor 212-14


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83 Thorton and Young-DeMarco 1019


85 Thorton and Young-DeMarco 1019


Sneed


“7th Heaven Theme Song Lyrics.”

O’Hare


111 Wertheimer


113 Wertheimer

114 “Pilot.”

115 “Pilot.”


119 “A Messenger, Nothing More.”


123 Bellafante


125 “Awards for Lauren Graham”

126 Bellafante

127 Cantor


Works Cited


