

ABSTRACT

“Our Real Family, The One We Chose”: The Function of Comfort in the Sitcom Family

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Throughout history, the situation comedy (or “sitcom”) has continually been used as a form of comfort for the viewer. The original sitcoms of the 1950s were filled with themes that reinforced the stability of the traditional family model after the cultural shifts during the world wars. While that style of sitcom and its family has changed, its function to viewers has largely remained the same. While it no longer is about reinforcing a traditional family structure, the sitcom does work to comfort the viewers that are watching. This study works to examine how and why the sitcom family has evolved, what the new sitcom family looks like today, and what that means for societal values. The sitcoms *Friends* (1994), *The Office* (2005), *Parks and Recreation* (2009), *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013), and *Community* (2009) will be used as case studies to understand the new dominant type of sitcom family: The constructed family.

"Our Real Family, The One We Chose": The Function of Comfort in the Sitcom Family

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CHAPTER ONE	1
<i>The Fluid Definition of Family Throughout History</i>	5
<i>Forces of Change in the Sitcom Family</i>	7
<i>Methodology</i>	11
CHAPTER TWO	14
<i>The Fracturing Nuclear Family – 1960s</i>	17
<i>Norman Lear and Workplace Sitcoms – 1970s</i>	20
<i>Returning to the Domestic Sphere – 1980s</i>	25
<i>Breaking the Mold – 1990s</i>	27
<i>Evolving the Sitcom Form – 2000s</i>	30
CHAPTER THREE	33
<i>Merging the Old and New Sitcom</i>	34
<i>Familial Themes in the Characters of Friends</i>	36
Chandler	37
Rachel	41
Monica	43
Joey	45
Phoebe	47
Ross	49
<i>Conclusion</i>	51
CHAPTER FOUR	53
<i>Michael Scott as the Head of the Family in The Office</i>	56
<i>Cultivation of a Community in Parks and Recreation</i>	63
<i>Furthering the Family with Brooklyn Nine-Nine</i>	69
<i>Conclusion</i>	74
CHAPTER FIVE	76
<i>Community and Postmodernism</i>	78

<i>A Sitcom about The Sitcom</i>	81
<i>The Community of Community</i>	86
<i>Conclusion</i>	95
CHAPTER SIX	97
APPENDIX A	102
Figure 1	102
Figure 2	104
Figure 3	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY	105

LIST OF TABLES

Figure 1. Timeline of TV Shows.....	102
Figure 2. Timeline of TV Shows.....	103
Figure 3. Timeline of TV Shows.....	104

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loved and cared for outside of the screen.

CHAPTER ONE

Comfort in the Sitcom Family

Statisticians report that television is watched over six hours a day in the average American household. I don't know any fiction writers who live in average American households. I suspect Louise Erdrich might. Actually I have never seen an average American household. Except on TV.

-David Foster Wallace, *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*

The development of the television industry helped establish a sense of stability and comfort in the wake of a century filled with war. Unsurprisingly, when television did finally come to fruition after being postponed by the outbreak of the Second World War (Taylor), its primary goal was to affirm the steadiness of the new era, the supposed steadfast nature of Postwar America. “Sitcoms were a distraction, a gentle lullaby of a gentler, kinder, America” (Austerlitz 1), and at the very center of this lullaby was the American family, acting as a beacon for what was good and right and perfect in society. If viewers’ lives did not match up with the status quo on screen, then it was them, the TV proclaimed, not the fictional families, who were strange, irregular, and wrong. Additionally, the American family happened to be the most universal content that could be put on the screen, maximizing accessibility to the audience and minimizing any chance of viewer alienation. Every viewer had some form of family—people with whom they would fight, cry, and laugh. This universality was largely the key to early television’s success because “[f]amily is the one experience to which virtually all viewers can relate” (Dalton and Linder 17).

The term “sitcom”—used as shorthand for the phrase “situation comedy”—is a television genre originating in radio that is comedic in nature and usually centered around a family. The most likely origins of the word have been traced to a *TV Guide* article written in 1953, where the author stated “[e]ver since *I Love Lucy* zoomed to the top rung on the rating ladder, it seems the networks have been filling every available half hour with another situation comedy” (TV Guide, 1953). Roughly 10 years later, the still influential *LIFE* magazine popularized the shortening of the phrase to its present incarnation, saying, “[b]ecause situation comedies (known hereafter as sitcoms) have become the blue chips of the business, we are in for even more of them this year” (LIFE, 1964). This otherwise unremarkable article highlighted and gave a name to what was already permeating television 20 years after it was created. America was engrossed in the sitcom and its family, which was already starting to evolve from its humble origins.

Considering its beginnings, the fact that the sitcom is still a cultural touchstone in the current “Golden Age of Television” (Leopold; Cowan; Reese) is noteworthy and warrants more exploration. As time marched on and the world wars of the first half of the 20th century became more distant, the endurance of the sitcom speaks to its ultimate accessibility and, more crucially, its ability to adapt alongside the ever-changing landscape of American culture. Most sitcoms in modern-day America bear almost no resemblance to the foundational sitcoms from the 1950s because, like any staple in our culture, evolution is inevitable. The sitcom is still around, and understanding why it has remained viable can help highlight the cultural changes in American history. As with the origins of the sitcom, the reasons behind its evolution are never far from the historical happenings of the time. And, more so than perhaps any form of mass media in the 20th

century, the evolution of the sitcom is tied not just to the cultural shifts of the times, but also to the cultural ideals for which American society strived.

As the sitcom was evolving, the family was evolving, as well. In the early days of the genre, the idea of family was as safe and comfortable as an America in the wake of war was willing to let it be: “father knew best, mother nurtured, and children learned their place within the family” (Dalton and Linder 19). These families represented the glorification of an unattainable ideal: an impossibly perfected family, one without any of the difficulties that so often plagued families in the real world (Austerlitz). The sitcom started with the family and in its current incarnation still deals primarily with familial themes. However, the more traditional families of the Andersons (*Father Knows Best* (1954)) and the Cleavers (*Leave It to Beaver* (1957)) are nearly nonexistent on our screens today, completely eclipsed by families of an entirely different breed. Now we see families where biological relation plays almost no factor—families formed around people who work together or go to school together, for example. These non-biological families have come to be known as “constructed families” (Dalton and Linder). Unlike the biological family, a “constructed family is family by choice, family without the hang-up of family roles, family without hierarchy” (Dalton and Linder 24).¹ The reality is that the most acclaimed and culturally permeating sitcoms today are no longer focused on a literal, biological family. Instead, the constructed family has risen to take its place.

While the Nielsen ratings (the dominant system used by the television industry to measure viewership) have often indicated that traditional sitcoms remain popular—

¹ The term “constructed family” is the catchall term I will be using here, as it most frequently appears in the literature on sitcoms and families. In the realm of family communication and anthropology, “fictive or voluntary kin” and “found family” have also been used to describe this same phenomenon.

therefore suggesting that these types of sitcoms have not fully died out—the phenomenon of the constructed family sitcom still is important. In the age of the Internet, Nielsen ratings have been proven to not always accurately indicate the actual size of the audience (Kavner; Steel). They are unable to properly account for those without televisions who watch their shows (sometimes religiously) online or people who binge-watch content on any number of streaming services. Unlike decades previous, there are more immediate ways to gauge audience connection with a given television program. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) allows users to rate TV shows on a scale of one to 10, and on their constantly updated list of the 250 top-rated TV shows, the highest rated sitcoms are those that follow the constructed family model (Users)—*Friends* (1994), *Seinfeld* (1989), *Freaks and Geeks* (1999), *The Office* (2005), *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005), *Community* (2009), *Parks and Recreation* (2009), and *Arrested Development* (2003). *Arrested Development*, a show centered on a rich, biologically connected family, is the outlier, but its unique and subversive nature still contribute to this argument (Users). While the IMDb does not act as empirical evidence of the artistic superiority of the show or even as definitive proof of popularity, it does begin to illustrate the notion that sitcoms built around a constructed family resonate on some level with audiences.

Therefore, a look at the evolution of the sitcom necessitates an extensive exploration of why and how the sitcom family has also evolved. This exploration will attempt to shed light on the forces that shaped both our culture and the sitcom itself, showing that the sitcom family has evolved from a traditional nuclear ideal with the goal of comforting America in a time of postwar uncertainty, to a constructed family made up of a mix of coworkers/friends/biological family members who represent the desire to

portray family not as an ideal, but as an evolving and unique experience, while also indicating a shift toward a more subversive, reflexive, and postmodern format. However, even with this evolution, I believe that the sitcom today still acts as a means of comfort for viewers irrespective of family makeup.

While the term *comfort* is an idea that seems readily obvious, its specific definition in relation to the sitcom merits discussion. *Comfort* is generally defined as “a person or thing that makes someone feel less worried, upset, frightened, etc.” (Merriam Webster, 2017). In reference to the original creation of the sitcom, “comfort” meant feeling less worried about the state of the literal family structure. As the sitcom’s form has changed, the definition of comfort has not changed. However, the object that is in need of comfort or reassurance has. Today, the function of the constructed family serves as a comfort, not to the literal traditional family, but to the resolution of the concept of family itself.

The Fluid Definition of Family Throughout History

When speaking about constructed families as opposed to traditional families, a frame of reference needs to be established for what is meant by “traditional family.” In the years before the 1950s, “traditional” was not synonymous with what has come to be known as the nuclear family.² In the years preceding the Second World War, the concept of family was not limited to a husband, wife, and children, but to the entire extended family (Reinecke and Oliver). This meant that all family members—aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandparents—often lived together under one roof, even if circumstances were

² The term “nuclear family” here being defined by the Oxford dictionary in 1947 as “a family that consists of father, mother and children, when it is thought of as a unit in society” (Oxford Dictionary).

unfavorable. For example, in the first decade of the 20th century, poor and overcrowded districts in Philadelphia would house unreasonable numbers of family members in small, crammed apartments—with an average of 6.4 people in apartments averaging 2.6 rooms (Dinwiddie). Therefore, despite inconveniences, large groups of family members were staying in, or around, the same living area. However, while the family was large and encompassing, there was still minimal deviation from proscribed gender roles and family hierarchy. Men were still expected to work outside the home, and women were still largely assumed to be homemakers.

When the United States entered World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, an unprepared America had to employ major cultural shifts to adjust on the home front (Colman; Yellin). Originally constrained to a domestic role in the decades before the war, women were now called upon to fill the vacuum left by men leaving to fight, and teenagers were often forced to drop out of school and enter the work force. The entire nation shifted to support the soldiers overseas and to make ends meet within their own specific familial situations (Winkler). However, once the war ended and soldiers returned home, there was a dissonance of expectations as Americans tried to adjust to a postwar life. Women had ascended to the ideal of the iconic Rosie the Riveter, and the expectation and even the trend now was to function in a role outside of the domestic realm (Colman).

In this stage of American history, the expectation for what a family should be was now in flux. Family members were no longer existent under the same roof or in the same general location. In a post-WWII world, stability of the immediate family was extremely important to people: “family structure in the ’50s was based around one central necessity:

a secure life” (Hussung). Now, a “traditional” family was smaller and more focused on the immediate family. However, this idea of a family, while certainly present in some sense, was treated more like an ideal than a reality. Families were smaller, but rarely as proper and put together as some wanted to believe. Instead of pushing toward a new form of family in America after World War II, a family where gender roles could be subverted and old structures no longer remained absolute, the gradual trend became to assert that a simpler family was intact and still desirable as a lifestyle to achieve (Taylor).

This is what is generally referenced when speaking of the traditional family of the sitcom. Not quite the same as before the war, but in stark contrast to the world during the war, the nuclear family seen on TV insisted that, while the specific make-up of the prewar family had changed, the construct of the family as America knew it was not in danger. From this emerged our ideals of the nuclear family, an idealized version to comfort America in a time of great uncertainty.

Forces of Change in the Sitcom Family

Upon initial examination, it is easy to dismiss the sitcom’s development as one of linear progression, starting as traditional and slowly working its way toward the progressive and subversive. However, sitcom history has shown that this is not entirely the case. The constructed family was present as early as *The Phil Silvers Show* (1955).³ Since its very beginning the sitcom has gone through several rotations of family styles. While identifying these cyclical shifts matters, it is even more important to track what has caused them and what differences each cycle holds in the new rotation.

³ The show centers around Sergeant Ernie Bilko (Phil Silvers) on the Kansas U.S. Army Camp, his friends, and their antics on the base.

The 1970s marked the first substantial move toward a non-biological family. As America became more wary of the status quo amidst a turbulent political scene, the sitcom started to distance itself from these established norms, as well. During this decade, the sitcom left the house and moved into the workplace, with family forming from the employees in an organization. These families did not remain in the public eye for very long, however. At the conclusion of the 1970s, the sitcom wheel continued to turn, and the workplace sitcom largely vacated the dominant culture. Back again was a more traditional and familial sitcom, albeit slightly modified from its 1960s counterparts (Taylor).

While the sitcom has oscillated over time, it nearly always does so as a reaction to what came before it. The 1970s reacted to the supposedly straightforward posture of the 1960s. The 1980s sought to return to the nuclear biological family after its absence from the '70s. Realism and subverting the normal family was the through line of the 1990s. And the early 2000s furthered the '90s mentality, pushing on to fresh frontiers and new extremes. Today, the family retreats into the postmodern world even further, intentionally becoming more distant from its roots as an exercise in exploring new avenues of the human experience (Austerlitz).

As the sitcom continued to adapt, the final key trait of the sitcom family was developing at the same time. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, culturally and ideologically, society was shifting from modernism to postmodernism. Postmodernism started, much like the sitcom, as a reaction to what came before it. Modernism had replaced the thinking of the Age of Enlightenment, and postmodernism worked to do the same (McHale). Starting primarily in architecture, postmodernism

responded to the painfully practical modernist architecture in favor of something that was more complex (Powell).

While extensive and multifaceted, postmodernism as it relates to the sitcom can be largely understood through several key, defining concepts. The first is the removal of the center (Powell). This center, in regards to popular culture and media, usually references a dominant ideology, an overarching narrative with which society collectively agrees. As postmodernism began to take root, the dominant ideology became the lack of a dominant ideology. This meant that family did not need to fit one clean and simple definition (McHale). The second key idea of postmodernism as it relates to this study is its ability to dialogue with the past. Now what is created is not only about the present, but is constantly aware of the past, explicitly referencing it in the work and making it an integral part of creation (Downing). Known as “doubling,” this concept feeds directly into the removal of a center, allowing for an open dialogue with past work without ever committing to its ideology and style. These basic concepts of postmodernism allow the proper context for understanding how they began to work into the sitcom family.

Following the creation of *Seinfeld*, the new decade of popular culture was beginning to embrace postmodern ideas. This marks a stark contrast to the non-familial sitcoms from the '70s. While those sitcoms came from exhaustion of the oversaturation of the idealized family presented on television, these sitcoms stemmed from the desire similar to *Seinfeld* to remove the dominant center usually seen in TV shows. In this manner we see multiple forces coming together to create something new. Postmodernism entered the cycle of the sitcom as it continued to evolve.

The dominant sitcoms of today are much more invested in having an open and self-aware conversation with the past. *30 Rock* (2006) was continually creating a dialogue with past versions of the sitcom, such as characters attempting to write and direct the unfinished series finale for the hit sitcom *Night Court* (1984) or TV executives successfully pitching derivative detective and reality TV shows titled *God Cop* and *Milf Island*. Similarly, *Community* was seemingly incapable of airing an episode without framing it around some classic sitcom trope; a character at one point tells two unlikable characters, “You’re keeping us from being *Friends*.” In a world where everything has already been done and redone, with nothing new under the sitcom sun, the only way to be original is to be reflective. As stated by Umberto Eco:

A man who loves a very cultivated woman [knows] that he cannot say to her ‘I love you madly’, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly’. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. (Bondanella 67)

As such, the postmodern sitcom follows suit. Postmodernism must frame its understanding of the world through this lens because it knows that everything has already been spoken about before it is written (Dalton and Linder). This is another key shift seen in the sitcom today.

In the same way that the sitcom is rewritten to acknowledge the past and forge a strange and different future, the family within the sitcom does the same. The contemporary sitcom reflects and calls upon its great and iconic predecessors, aware that the audience is aware of their existence as well, using this knowledge to create a strange and new type of comforting sitcom family. In today’s world, with all of the grand

narratives being sidelined and all of the stories supposedly having been already told, it follows that the sitcom family would both dialogue with the past and refuse to conform too closely to anything that came before it.

While seemingly unrecognizable from its ancestors from the 1950, today's sitcom families still possess the fundamental element of comfort at their core. The sitcom format was formulated largely to provide reassurance for the family in a time when its entire construct seemed destined to fall apart. Today, with iterations of constructed families that do not even remotely resemble the nuclear family, the sitcom family comes full circle. The sitcom has continually reacted to the past and oscillated between televisual styles and types of family. This constant development and redevelopment has been complicated by the introduction of postmodernism within the last 30 years. However, despite all of these changes, the sitcom and its family are still focused on comfort, even if there is no one specific type of family anymore. Whether the audience is watching *Beaver Cleaver* or *Michael Scott*, the sitcom's goal was and still is one of reassurance and comfort.

Methodology

This thesis will analyze the family as it currently exists on the sitcom today within the context of all of the various social and institutional forces that have shaped it over the years. Each subsequent chapter will offer a detailed analysis of an important sitcom that helps further illustrate the new sitcom family and how it has evolved.⁴ Each sitcom will

⁴ Selecting TV shows for analysis is an incredibly subjective endeavor and naturally cannot accommodate the entirety of the sitcom landscape at the time of writing. However, as mentioned above, a combination of Nielsen ratings and user ratings from online movie sites helped guide the decision-making process in regards to the sitcoms chosen for analysis (Users).

be interrogated under a set of questions that will better highlight their contributions to the field and the topic at hand:

1. In what ways does this sitcom create its constructed family?
2. How do the characters' arcs benefit from involvement in a constructed family?
3. How does the sitcom ultimately cultivate an environment of comfort for the audience?

The first of these analyses will focus on *Friends*. Premiering in 1994, *Friends* was one of the most popular shows not to be centered on a biological family. Instead, the six titular friends create their own family through their shared experiences. *Friends* is the oldest of the shows analyzed here, and much of its significance comes from its place in sitcom history. The show works as a bridge between the old and new styles of sitcoms, embracing the past while forging its way into the future to create a new status quo. In addition to the above questions, I will analyze the show's main themes of family, showing how it exemplifies the constructed family values and created a road map that sitcoms continue to follow to this day.

Following that will be an excursion into the modern-day workplace sitcom, which has made a resurgence since all but disappearing from screens decades ago, largely as a result of the work done by Ricky Gervais, Stephen Merchant, Greg Daniels, and Michael Schur (Mills). TV shows like *Parks and Recreation*, *30 Rock*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013), and both the U.K. and the American versions of *The Office* (2001, 2005) ushered in the new era of workplace sitcoms. Much like Norman Lear did in the 1970s, Daniels and Schur have acted as a dominant voice in the sitcom world of the 2000s, and

their shows *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* each hold a key to shaping our understanding of the constructed family. Even more importantly, seeing how these shows both differ and hold similarities to the workplace sitcoms of the past is crucial for understanding how the cyclical sitcom merges with the postmodernism culture of today.

From there, the study will shift to *Community*, which acts as a literal embodiment of the postmodern sitcom family. Within the show's world, collections of community college students in a Spanish study group form a constructed family. The structure of the show is framed in a way to lampshade these familial themes, as well as comment on the sitcom form as a whole. Because of these factors, *Community* acts as the strongest example of where the sitcom has gone in both a familial and cultural sense.

To conclude, a final appraisal of these three chapters and the sitcoms discussed within them will be conducted, merging their themes and reflecting more completely on how the sitcom family has developed to this point, what these findings represent from a cultural and ideological standpoint in America, and what that all means in terms of comfort for the American TV audience.

CHAPTER TWO

A History of the Sitcom¹

It's TV; it's comfort. It's a friend you've known so well, and for so long you just let it be with you.

- Abed Nadir, *Community*

The Origin of the Sitcom Family – 1950s

To fill in the blanks between this early and idealized sitcom family and the currently constructed sitcom family, there are several key forces of change that have to be explored: the inherent cyclical nature of the sitcom, the reactive nature of the sitcom, and the rise of postmodernism. In its beginning, television acted for the most part as an extension of radio, becoming the dominant piece of technology in the household (Austerlitz). This shift marked something of a cultural turning point, a change that was felt everywhere “in the domestic sphere, regardless of geography or class” (Dalton and Linder 13). Since TV became as present as radio, all of the earliest entertainment genres were lifted directly from the radio onto the television screens (Savorelli).

The first notable TV families, then, were those that survived the switch from our ears to our eyes. These pioneering shows were *The Goldbergs* (1949) and *The Amos 'n Andy Show* (1951).² Initially, these shows did little to distinguish themselves from their

¹ For a visual representation of the history of the sitcom, please refer to Appendix Figure A.

² While these shows gained the most popularity and stayed in the forefront of society's mind for the longest, the shows technically credited as the first sitcoms are

radio counterparts, often reusing radio script verbatim for full episodes of television (Savorelli). Even when they deviated from existing radio scripts, TV sitcoms were still essentially radio shows with visuals. While these shows were still reusing what had been profitable from the previous medium, this era was “a time of experimentation and innovation because the rules had not been firmly established” (Dalton and Linder 14). What a sitcom could be was changing even as it was still being created.

Aesthetically, Karl Freund was among the first to establish the signature look of early sitcoms that carries over even in today’s sitcoms. Freund began his career as a cinematographer in Europe, contributing his artistic vision to works like *Metropolis* (1927), and, after emigrating to the U.S., *Dracula* (1931). He won an Academy Award for *The Good Earth* (1937) and was nominated for two others. In 1965, The German Film Awards presented him an honorary award for “his continued outstanding individual contributions to the German film over the years” (*German Film Awards (1965)*). On *I Love Lucy* (1951) he pioneered the simple but efficient flat lighting set-up to maximize ease of shooting while still allowing for a degree of depth and realism. This show took the best of radio and film and combined them to produce a winning formula. He borrowed the live studio audience set-up from radio and reworked the traditional continuity editing style from film to both engross and connect with the audience while establishing a visual tone akin to what viewers could see in theaters (Dalton and Linder; Austerlitz). Starting in the early 1950s, this style gained popularity and quickly spread through the rest of the sitcom world.

Pinwright’s Progress (1946) in the U.K. and *Mary Kay and Johnny* (1947) in the U.S (“First television sitcom,” 2017).

Once the sitcom went through its early trial-and-error phase and settled into a more familiar routine, what it had to say about the rest of the world was also notably safe and conservative. Socially, these early works were uninterested in challenging or confronting any of the issues of the day. *Amos 'n Andy*, a show centered around two black men, made little mention of the difficult reality that such men had to deal with on a daily basis.³ Onscreen family life followed in a similar vein. In keeping with the themes of affirming the thriving state of the family, the roles people played, specifically gender roles, were not remotely challenged because, “in successful 1950s families, members worked together, understood their individual roles, and did what was expected of them” (Dalton and Linder 52). Deviation from this was rare.

Even when shows were centered on prominent female characters, they usually remained within the domestic sphere, incapable of escaping (Austerlitz). Alice Kramden (Audrey Meadows) of *The Honeymooners* (1955) may have been able to hold her own in any number of screaming matches with her bus-driving husband Ralph, but she was always relegated to remaining at home while the men went out to work. Further, *I Love Lucy*'s titular Lucy exists in a constant state of aspiration, wanting nothing more than to be in the spotlight like her husband, Ricky Ricardo. However, no number of clever schemes or elaborate costumes can get her out of her domestic role. These shows and others like them—*Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*—established a largely fictional type of family that had not existed before the war and certainly did not exist so cleanly after it. This fiction, a “liberal-conservative dream of a harmonious society in which the

³ To further complicate the issue, when the show was on the radio, the show's creators Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll voiced the titular characters despite not being black.

conditions for social conflict would disappear because there would be plenty of everything to go around” (Taylor 26), highlighted the very essence of what types of family the beginnings of television were interested in portraying.

The Fracturing Nuclear Family – 1960s

As television producers in the 1950s were invested in discovering what the sitcom was and then using that to shape the impressions of the era, television creators of the 1960s worked toward perpetuating this notion of largely ignoring any of the social or political issues of the day.⁴ While these initially tame and safe representations served to establish stability in the shadow of a world war, the 1960s looked at TV as a chance to instruct. Since TV was so readily available in the home, “public interest groups [placed] television under greater pressure than other entertainment media to be ‘socially responsible,’ especially where the family [was] concerned” (Taylor 53). Consequentially, the TV family in the ‘60s leaned even stronger toward creating an image of what the family should be, instead of what it was.

One major force that prevented television from branching out, becoming more adventurous, and taking more risks can be traced back to the Kennedy administration. In 1961, Newton Minnow, the newly appointed chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), rebuked television programming and urged producers to reassess their program choices and work toward something more wholesome. He described the current TV landscape as a “vast wasteland...blood and thunder, mayhem, violence,

⁴ The fact that southern television stations often refused to air TV programs with African Americans in them functions as an institutional example of perpetuating these notions (Perlman).

sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials—many screaming, cajoling, and offending” (Barnouw 300). Considering his position as chair of the FCC in the administration, television producers were forced to compile (Taylor). Some of his criticisms provoked change, while others did not. Still, his speech spoke even further to the responsibility that some people saw TV having, resulting in a line-up of socially responsible shows throughout the decade.

It is impossible to discuss the sitcom family in the 1960s without addressing *Leave it to Beaver*, although it technically began in the 1950s. Centered on the Cleaver family, specifically their son Theodore—nicknamed Beaver—the show rarely strayed from good-natured adventures where parents could teach their children lessons over the dinner table. They lived in a suburb with a wonderful lawn, Ward the father worked and wore a suit and tie around the house, while his wife June was a homemaker, spending her days wearing a sundress and preparing dinner for the family. Through and through, it was wholly the embodiment of the nuclear family. However, just as before, there was still something false about the lives they led. Even though it was on our screen, “[o]bjectively, we know that the Cleavers represent an ideal rather than a norm” (Dalton and Linder). This beacon of American purity permeated widely through the rest of television, as well.

Concurrent with *Leave it to Beaver* were several unusual and unique styles of sitcoms that, while not exactly the embodiment of the nuclear family, certainly did not work toward representing the evolving family structure. The first group of shows, labeled “rural sitcoms” (Dalton and Linder), were either populated with or targeted at rural

Americans, one of the largest demographics in the country.⁵ These included *The Real McCoys* (1957), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962), and *Green Acres* (1965). The second off-kilter group of sitcoms prominent in this decade came to be known as the “magicom” (Dalton and Linder). This generally referred to a small, but popular niche of magic-themed sitcoms—*Mister Ed* (1958), *My Favorite Martian* (1963), *My Living Doll* (1964), *Bewitched* (1964), *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965), and *My Mother the Car* (1965). Despite their farfetched and futuristic premises, these magicoms were often notorious for featuring regressive values within the American family structure. *I Dream of Jeanine* specifically exposed a dark avenue of gender roles in television. The show centered on a man finding a female genie in a bottle who has promised to serve his every wish. Even with the initially subversive set-up of a single man living with a scantily clad woman, the show rarely confronted or subverted its archaic view of male and female relationships. The master of the titular Jeanine was in total control of someone with seemingly infinite power, despite the fact that he was portrayed as pathetic and helpless. This poor dichotomy created the undeniable impression that, “even the most powerful woman comes in second to a marginal man, who dominates the household solely through patriarchal privilege” (Norris). In hindsight, this show inadvertently acted as a microcosm of the television culture of the day. One stray show amidst a mass narrative of others could be reduced to an anomaly, but the ‘60s was saturated with magical, escapist shows

⁵ In the 2006 sitcom *30 Rock*, Alec Baldwin’s character, Jack Donaghy, travels to Stone Mountain, Georgia, to research what makes middle America laugh in order to boost NBC’s ratings, highlighting how, even 50 years later, the prominence of this demographic.

of this nature. *My Living Doll*, *Bewitched*, and *My Mother the Car*⁶ all featured familial roles that played into a television culture that did not seek to challenge or reform.

This style of television during the 1960s highlights several key overarching narratives of the decade. The style speaks to the inability of sitcom producers and writers to acknowledge the turning tide of cultural change, most prominently the second wave feminist movement that was gaining momentum (Walsh). Carrying on the work of the decade previous, this era was still invested in maintaining the appearance of the status quo instead of representing those changes in the content of its television programming. In regards to the family, sitcoms were insistent that things were still unchanged, as well. While many of the families in these shows did not fit the tightest definition of the nuclear family, none of the content worked to dissuade that family structure as ideal and dominant. Instead, these shows' magical content swept the issues under the rug and distracted with the fantastical, suggesting that even if "viewers could not be reassured [of the security of the nuclear family], at least they could be diverted" (Dalton and Linder). While the shifting roles in the family was causing the nuclear family to fracture in reality, television was still trying to hold on to its own reassuring origins.

Norman Lear and Workplace Sitcoms – 1970s

The beginning of the 1970s resulted in two controversial developments in American society that drastically changed both social and television culture. America's growing military involvement in Vietnam was the first of the major stepping-stones toward a culture of disillusionment toward the government. After the self-importance that

⁶ *My Mother the Car* was also rated as the second worst TV show of all time (After *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991)) by *TV Guide* (Cosgrove-Mather).

came with “The Good War” of WWII, the war in Vietnam tested many Americans’ blind patriotism and trust in government (Meyer). The war was messy, costly, and ultimately a failure for the country at large. The troops returned home unsuccessful and disillusioned with the people who sent them overseas in the first place. Immediately following this war was the Watergate scandal involving President Richard Nixon. After a break-in at the Democrat headquarters in the Watergate office, Nixon came under scrutiny for his role in attempting to cover up the incident. This resulted in a chain of events that resulted in Nixon’s resignation. Coming off the back of an overwhelming reelection, the news of Nixon’s involvement in the scandal shook the average American’s trust in the government as a whole (Vavreck).

These events helped shape a society that was less willing to go along with the status quo. From this mindset came the sitcoms of the 1970s. While littered with a variety of styles and families throughout the decade, the vast majority of sitcoms during this period can be divided into two categories: Workplace sitcoms and Norman Lear-created shows.

The first prominent shift toward the idea of the constructed family can be found around the beginning of the 1970s in workplace sitcoms like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970), *M*A*S*H* (1972), *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972), *WKRP in Cincinnati* (1978) and *Taxi* (1978) that arose to replace the previous decade’s comfortable portrayal of the nuclear family. The oversaturation of rural families sitcoms caused the dominant tone of sitcoms to shift (Taylor; Dalton and Linder). In tandem with this alteration, advertisers started to become aware of how TV audiences spent their money: “what mattered was less *how many* people tuned in than *how much* they earned and were willing

to spend on consumer products” (Taylor 44). These factors prompted a shift away from the nuclear and rural family in favor of something members of the upper middle class living in the city would be more inclined to watch.

In these television workplaces, people with careers were the family members. Characters defaulted into roles of mother, father, and children. Instead of a biological bond, they formed a connection through the ups and downs of their professional career. Unlike sitcoms from the previous decades, where the workplace functioned almost exclusively as an off-screen way to make ends meet, the sitcoms that emerged during this era took that off-screen dynamic and made it central to the story. Instead of escaping the workplace to see your family, your family was already a part of the workplace. After the rural sitcoms had been abandoned in favor of a more urban audience that was more likely to buy what advertisers were selling on TV, workplace sitcoms grew organically out of the desire to break away from the television norms in a disillusioned cultural climate (Austerlitz). With the illusions of the past two decades finally cracking, “[b]iological family no longer offered the security of the 1950s sitcoms because, for many prized boomer viewers, family [was] not a stable institution” (Dalton and Linder 23). This resulted in a string of shows that took the focus off of the immediate family and transplanted it into the workplace. These programs allowed coworkers to cultivate unity and create familial bonds together in the workplace.

In this new family, biological relations were usually strained or non-existent. Characters were invested in pouring into their careers, not settling down and getting married as was usually expected. Instead, through the banality of the workplace, bonds were formed and families were created. The cab drivers in *Taxi* were connected in

camaraderie over disdain for their cruel supervisor, Louie De Palma (Danny Devito), while Hawkeye and his medical crew could always bemoan the Korean War on *M*A*S*H*. These workplace sitcoms were key in marking some of the first substantial shifts in sitcom culture to that point. While they declined in popularity in the 1980s, they would never completely disappear, acting as a continual reminder of their role in pushing the sitcom forward.

Additionally, within these shows, gender roles were starting to reform, or at the very least were challenged. In *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Moore's character Mary Richards combats sexism on a daily basis (usually from her boss, Lou Grant) and must forge her way in a television industry that was largely dominated by men. The entire premise of the show, in which Mary moves to Minneapolis after breaking up with her fiancée, highlighted this tonal shift with an intentional focus not only on a career, but also on a direct reaction to a frustrating venture in a more traditional female role. The prominence and popularity of *Mary Tyler Moore* indicated the embracement of diversifying female roles in the sitcom world.

Back in the household, norms were continuing to break down, as well. Producer/writer Norman Lear achieved massive success throughout this decade with his confrontational look at the state of the American family. Upon surveying the content on American television, he found himself disappointed, saying, "they were all fine shows, but you would think by watching them that America had no blacks, no racial tension, that there was no Vietnam" (Morgan). While he would go on to create a variety of popular sitcoms in the 1970s—*Sanford and Son* (1972), *Maude* (1972), *Good Times* (1974), and *The Jeffersons* (1975)—his most influential contribution to bringing real-world issues

into the sitcom was with *All in the Family* (1971). This family sitcom centered on the bigoted Archie Bunker, his wife, his daughter, and his daughter's husband Mike Stivic all living together under one roof. The Bunker household was used as a place of discourse for the old and new conceptions of the family, with Archie's old and "traditional" ways continually colliding with Mike's "progressive" outlook on life. If workplace sitcoms were about placing their characters into the real world as a backdrop, *All in the Family* was about bringing the real world to the forefront of each episode (Vanderwerff). Episodes focused on feminism, the civil rights movement, rape, abortion, and other hot-topic issues of the day. While Archie may have been the loudest voice in the room, he was rarely the victor in his own home, usually made the fool by the younger generation.⁷

With '70s sitcoms, television finally shed its impression of comfort and security. Now much more concerned with what was actually happening in the real world instead of trying to hold on to the past, the culture of the screen as a whole spoke "to the doubts and uncertainties of a splintered modern consciousness bewildered by the volatile changes of postwar America" (Taylor, 1991 p. 109). A harsher version of reality had finally made its way to the sitcom screen, resulting in an adapting and changing sitcom family. Families could exist outside the home and in the workplace, women could take charge and lead the family, and father did not always know best.

⁷ One of the great controversies that blossomed out of *All in the Family* was whether or not Lear made Archie Bunker and his racist perspective too sympathetic (ARCHIE BUNKER FOR PRESIDENT shirts were designed and worn by fans). Ironically, as the show tried to confront and tear down these racist ideals throughout the show, many people still watched because they identified with Archie (Austerlitz).

Returning to the Domestic Sphere – 1980s

Again, the sitcom reacted to what came before it as America moved into the 1980s, this time proving the cyclical nature of the sitcom by returning to the domestic sphere. *The Cosby Show* (1984) is usually referred to as the most enduring sitcom from this decade.⁸ Bill Cosby's show centered on the Huxtables, a rich African American family living in New York. Wholly popular and one of the first positive examples of an African American family in a sitcom, *The Cosby Show* represents a great deal of the sitcom climate throughout the '80s.

Cliff Huxtable exemplifies the changing understanding of the father in sitcom family hierarchy. If Jim Anderson (*Father Knows Best*) was a father who was fully in command of his family and Archie Bunker was a father who had been dethroned, then Cliff Huxtable indicated the next stage of development. The father of the Huxtable household is not domineering nor overtly ridiculed, but more understanding and thoughtful. When his son Theo tells him he does not want to go to college, Cliff charmingly uses monopoly money to illustrate the error of his ways. However, when Theo tries to abuse this sympathy by appealing to it, suggesting "instead of being disappointed that I'm not like you, maybe you should be happy and love me anyway, because I'm your son" (1984), Cliff quickly replies,

Theo, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard in my life! No wonder you get D's in everything...you are going to try as hard as you can. And you're going to do it because I said so. I am your father. I brought you in this world, and I'll take you out! (1984)

⁸ While Bill Cosby's criminal actions of sexual assault before, during, and after his time on *The Cosby Show* undoubtedly taint the legacy of the program, it still possesses historical significance for understanding the television culture of the 1980s, and therefore must be discussed here at some length.

This exchange, landing as the biggest joke of the pilot episode, indicates the new style of fatherhood in the sitcom. Just as the mother had begun to move away from being restrained in the domestic sphere, the father was moving away from a simple and underdeveloped mentality to a more complex and evolved person.

Direct conversation about race was almost entirely lacking in *The Cosby Show*, in contrast to the confrontational nature of Norman Lear's '70s sitcoms. By having Cliff be a successful obstetrician and his wife Clair be a flourishing lawyer, *Cosby* was creating a world in which race no longer had to play a factor in thriving professionally and personally in America (Austerlitz, *Sitcom*; Jhally and Lewis). While certainly a controversial decision, it speaks to the dual nature of sitcom family *The Cosby Show* presented. While flowing naturally from the confrontational '70s, it still cycled back to the supposed tone-deaf era before it. The sitcom and its family were now able to borrow bits and pieces from its own history to forge forward.

Not all '80s sitcoms returned to the domestic realm. Following in the footsteps of *M*A*S*H* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Cheers* (1982) acted as the next step toward the full realization of the constructed family as the dominant voice on television. Like the workplace sitcoms of the '70s, *Cheers* moved away from the biological family, but also started to inch away from an exclusive workplace setting. The show was set almost entirely in the local Boston bar Cheers, where the regulars strike up conversations with each other and the staff, creating not quite a workplace family, but rather a group of friends forming a family (Dalton and Linder).

Again, a particular location such as a bar functions as a warm and friendly atmosphere to grow closer as a family. When the outside world is cold and inhospitable,

the theme song reminded the audience that it is nice to go “where everybody knows your name/and they’re always glad you came/You wanna be where you can see/our troubles are all the same” (1982). Usually the household was the place to assuage these worries, but *Cheers* embraced the shifting familial roles of the world and created a sitcom out of it, “a fantasia about people who spend all of their time together, and the ways in which close friends can become something more” (Austerlitz, *Sitcom* 167–68). Creators Les and Glen Charles explicitly made this intention known while pitching the show, suggesting that “This is about a family; it just happens not to be a group of brothers and sisters” (Austerlitz 168).

The rest of the 1980s sitcoms fell somewhere between these two shows. *Family Ties* (1982) furthered domestic conversation with a working mother and a sensitive father, *Roseanne* (1988) broke new ground by focusing on an overweight working-class family, and *Three’s Company* (1976)⁹ opened the door to the exploration of more taboo topics on television. At this point in the progress of the sitcom, the industry had time to try a variety of different approaches and techniques for how to create a sitcom and how to represent a family. As the 1980s came to an end, shows started to become even more experimental, branching out and looking to redefine everything about themselves in the decade to follow.

Breaking the Mold – 1990s

The sitcom of the ‘90s broke all the molds set before it (Dalton and Linder). Sitcoms could be longer than 30 minutes (*Freaks and Geeks*), they could be animated

⁹ While technically premiering in the late 1970s, *Three’s Company* still spent the majority of its airtime in the 1980s, making it a prominent cultural force in that decade.

(*The Simpsons* (1989)), and they could even be about nothing (*Seinfeld*). One of the largest factors for this change was the popularization of the cable network HBO's original programming, which was not constrained by the network restrictions with which other shows grappled. This freedom allowed for a different breed of sitcom. Shows like *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992) and *Sex and the City* (1999) abandoned the now old-fashioned laugh track and featured explicit content—swearing, nudity—thus creating sitcoms the public had never seen (Austerlitz, *Sitcom*).

Seinfeld, created by Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, made its appearance at the turn of the decade and pioneered a style that unofficially came to be known as the anti-sitcom. This show, which followed around a fictionalized Jerry Seinfeld living in New York, was adamant about eliminating the sentiment that frequented most sitcoms up to that point. Larry David's famous show motto "No hugging, no learning" meant that the show actively sought to subvert that which came before it (Kosner). This is key in the development of the sitcom family because *Seinfeld* was one of the first to suggest the idea that the sitcom did not need family at all. The family was first moved out of the household, with coworkers and even friends, but Seinfeld and David went one step further and removed family out of the center entirely, leaving nothing in its place (Armstrong).

This postmodern approach (more on that further down) forced viewers to focus on the mundane instead of the substantial. Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer were never focused on the actual problems of the world; they did not want to get married or settle down. Unlike most sitcoms, episodes were never about Jerry falling in love or trying to get a promotion, but about muffin tops, Pez dispensers, Mackinaw peaches, and puffy

shirts. Other shows have followed this pattern--*Arrested Development*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*--indicating the power that *Seinfeld* had on its audience. This represents another major moment of change in the sitcom family.

It is also impossible to discuss sitcoms in the 1990s without touching on perhaps the most formative sitcom of that era, *Friends*. While an entire chapter of this thesis is dedicated to this show, its significance needs to be discussed briefly here. *Friends* represents the culmination of several of the key shows already discussed. Starting with the workplace sitcoms of the '70s and carried forward by *Cheers* and even *Seinfeld*, *Friends* saw the fruition of the sitcom family leave both the household and the workplace while still remaining intact. Set in New York, *Friends* follows its six main characters as they grow together and form a type of family. While its primary traits are clearly present in numerous earlier sitcoms, *Friends* remains significant for several reasons. First, of all the early non-biological shows, *Friends* has largely been the one that has stayed in the public's mind (Users, 2017). Additionally, falling where it did on the timeline of sitcoms, it represents a key turning point for sitcoms at large, as it was "the last of the hugely successful traditional sitcoms, laugh track and all" (Austerlitz, *Sitcom* 264). While its content and ideas helped pave the way for the present day sitcom, its format was still planted firmly in the past. As such, *Friends* represents the sitcom and its family in flux, acting as a bridge between the old and new sitcom.

The 1990s was also the last decade that sitcoms occupied the majority of top spots in the TV ratings. Since the turn of the 21st century, sitcoms have failed to capture the majority of the television audience's attention, replaced by sports broadcasts and reality shows (TV Guide, 2017). To survive in the next millennium, the sitcom would have to

continue adapting, bringing it one step closer to what viewers now know as the present day sitcom.

Evolving the Sitcom Form – 2000s

There were several reasons for the decline in sitcom viewership during the 2000s. The success of shows like *Survivor* (2000) and *American Idol* (2002) ignited a fever for a new brand of television, resulting in myriad reality shows—*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* (2002), *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* (2002, 2003), *Dancing With the Stars* (2005)—that captivated American audiences. At the same time, HBO's original programming was starting to gain even more traction, and shows like *The Sopranos* (1999) and *The Wire* (2002) were getting people to consistently tune in. Lastly, sports programming was on the rise, as well, resulting in strong viewership during key prime-time hours.

However, this does not mean that the sitcom disappeared completely. Rather, it continued to evolve, with the format as seen today starting to take shape during this time. After being largely absent from the TV since the late '70s, the workplace sitcom found its way back. The hospital-based *Scrubs* (2001) depicted a group of medical school graduates doing residency together, while *30 Rock* shone a light on the behind-the-scenes antics of a NBC sketch comedy show. While these shows were received mostly positively, the Greg Daniels-created *The Office* (based on the BBC sitcom of the same name) became one of the most culturally defining shows of the decade. Filmed in a documentary style and set in the nondescript Pennsylvanian town of Scranton, the show documented the daily happenings of the paper supply company Dunder Mufflin and its

well-meaning, but incompetent manager Michael Scott. *The Office* gained popularity from its sharp writing, endearing characters, and its unique mockumentary filming style, and it ran with great success for nine seasons.

Even outside of the workplace, non-familial centered sitcoms were drawing more sharply into focus after the success of *Friends*. Any and every variation of this show was found during and after its run, “working class *Friends* (*The Drew Carey Show* (1995)), gay friends (*Will & Grace* (1998))...nerdy friends (*The Big Bang Theory* (2007)), and rebooted friends (*How I Met Your Mother* (2005))” (Austerlitz, *Sitcom* 267). These shows continued the work of both *Cheers* and *Friends*, creating a type of sitcom staple that focused on how we form familial bonds outside of our immediate family. This sitcom progression leads up into the modern day, presenting audiences with sitcom staples that rarely conform to the traditional family, but still focus on a desire to comfort and reassure the audience at the same time.

This sense of comfort is best exemplified in the way in which sitcoms dealt with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. There is almost no explicit reference made toward those events.¹⁰ While multiple dramas dealt directly with those events—*Law & Order* (1990), *The West Wing* (1999)—the sitcom as a whole generally refused to acknowledge its existence. This omission suggests that sitcom creators intrinsically knew that including content pertaining to those events would be

¹⁰ The two glaring exceptions being *South Park* (1997) and *Arrested Development* (both anti-sitcoms). The former focused an entire episode on the U.S. invading Afghanistan, while the latter included a joke where Tobias Fünke (David Cross) cites reasons for his failing marriage, saying, “Well, I don’t want to blame it all on 9/11, but it certainly didn’t help” (2003).

counterintuitive to a successful sitcom. Viewers tuned in not to deal with the harsh reality of those tragic events but rather to be distracted and comforted.

The above point ultimately ushers this thesis into the present and onto the case studies. The following chapters will provide in-depth analyses of specific sitcoms, with a focus on how they create their families outside of a biological framework and, more importantly, how they still communicate an ever-present tone of comfort to modern day audiences.

CHAPTER THREE

Friends

No one could ever know me.
No one could ever see me.
Seems you're the only one who knows what it's like to be me.
Someone to face the day with,
Make it through all the rest with,
Someone I'll always laugh with,
Even at my worst, I'm best with you.

- The Remembrants, *I'll Be There For You*

In the summer of 1994, director James Burrow (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Cheers*, *Taxi*) took the cast of the soon-to-be-aired sitcom *Friends* on a trip to Las Vegas. While eating in Caesar's Palace, he told each of them, "This is your last shot at anonymity. Once the show comes on the air, you guys will never be able to go anywhere without being hounded" (Eggenberger). Several decades later, Burrow's warning still rings true. *Friends* remains one of the most influential shows in television history. During its 10-year run, it remained in the top eight of the Nielsen ratings every season, even claiming the top spot during its eighth season and never dipping below fifth after its premiere season (Gitlin). After the conclusion of the series, it remained in the forefront of viewers' minds through syndication on network television and on streaming services, where it continued to be successful (*Friends* is the second most streamed show on Netflix as of 2017) (Banks). Additionally, it also holds a spot at number 40 on the IMDb's fan-rated 250 Top TV Shows of All Time, making it one of their highest rated sitcoms in that poll (Users).

As noted in the previous chapter, *Friends* aggregated a great deal of previously existing sitcom traits, furthering concepts and ideas set in place by *M*A*S*H*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Seinfeld*. All of these shows were interested in uprooting the traditional familial structure, but with the benefit of hindsight, none of them did this with a greater degree of popularity than *Friends* did. History has shown us that *Friends* largely finessed the formula to produce the most popular sitcom based on the constructed family up to that point (Banks; Gitlin).

Considering *Friends*' immense popularity, both when it originally aired and more than a decade after its final episode, any discussion about the sitcom family of today requires an understanding what made *Friends* so successful. Exploring its themes of family through friendship is important to obtaining a more complete grasp of the evolution of the sitcom family as a whole. Therefore, this chapter will feature a dual analysis of the show. First, there will be a brief analysis of its place in sitcom culture and how it embraced traditional sitcom characteristics while pioneering new ones. Following will be an exploration of how the show's content confirms the analysis above on how and why the sitcom family developed in the manner it has. From this analysis the three main questions of the study will be answered.

Merging the Old and New Sitcom

When *Friends* first aired, it was fortunate enough to be positioned before *Seinfeld* in a particularly coveted slot in NBC's Thursday night comedy line-up. The fact that it was able to remain successful in this spot acts as a strong entry point into the monetary success of *Friends* and how that factors into this discussion. As mentioned, *Friends* was

immensely successful both when it aired and today as thousands of younger fans discover it on streaming platforms like Netflix. While certainly still culturally relevant, even the most popular sitcoms today cannot match the ratings of older sitcoms. There are a myriad of factors for this reality, but it is due primarily to an increased interest in live sports as well as a gradual migration of content onto the internet (Austerlitz; Dalton and Linder). *Friends* was one of the last sitcoms to achieve mass popularity during its scheduled broadcasting time. Therefore, it acts as a unique bridge between the old and the new, marking a key transition for the sitcom.

Friends emulated so much of the classic sitcom style while simultaneously innovating and popularizing a great deal of what the sitcom is known for today. Most obviously, it continued the long-standing tradition of the laugh track. The '90s was a break from form in a number of sitcoms, largely in pursuit of a more "realistic" style of content. *Friends* maintained this structure, aesthetically linking it to its predecessors despite also making strides into the future. In addition to utilizing a laugh track, each episode of *Friends* was filmed in front of a studio audience. This was a hold-over from radio and an important element that distinguished television from movies. However, as was common in sitcoms of this format, general continuity was given much less attention. This was seen in inconsistencies over narrative information among the friends—the number of siblings Joey has, the numbers on the apartment doors, Ross's actual birth date—as well as discontinuity between even two individual shots—doors opening or closing, shirt colors changing, objects on set changing location. There was no expectation from the audience to carefully re-watch each episode and notice these continuity issues. Before *Friends* began playing on online streaming platforms, there was no real venue for

eagle-eyed viewers to notice these inconsistencies. So, while it was developing themes that would be more overtly introduced in the next millennium, its structure and format derived from the old sitcom world.

Familial Themes in the Characters of Friends

Friends immediately positions itself as a show about a family via the title sequence, which features the six main cast members dancing in a Central Park fountain with The Remembrants tune “I’ll Be There for You” playing over their actions. For 236 episodes, viewers were continually reminded of the mantra of the show, placed in the catchy theme, “I’ll be there for you when the rain starts to pour/I’ll be there for you like I’ve been there before/I’ll be there for you cause you’re there for me too” (1994). These sentiments highlighted that *Friends* was not interested in following superficial acquaintances, but deeply emotional relationships, an idea furthered as the show progressed with the montage during the theme song evolving from casual shots of the cast high-fiving to more intimate scenes of them hugging or kissing.

The pilot (“The One Where Monica Gets a Roommate”) further establishes the show’s central ideas. There is control freak Monica Geller (Courtney Cox) and her paleontologist brother Ross (David Schwimmer). Across the hall from Monica are roommates and best friends Chandler Bing (Matthew Perry) and Joey Tribbiani (Matt LeBlanc). Joining the four of them in their friend group is the ditzy, but endearing masseuse Phoebe Buffay (Lisa Kudrow). Their lives are all altered when Monica’s high school friend Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston) shows up unannounced after getting cold feet and leaving her fiancé at the altar. Monica gives her a place to stay, and Rachel is

quickly welcomed into the fold as one of the Friends. Beyond the traditional narrative work expected from a pilot (establishing a status quo, setting up love interests, etc.) the pilot episode of *Friends* specifically sets up traits associated with the constructed family. Shows like *All in the Family* and *I Love Lucy* generally revolved around a living room setting where the family bonded. However, in *Friends* the living room is transported out of the house and into the public sphere. The coffee shop Central Perk became the new living room, with furniture that was even awkwardly rearranged to resemble a traditional living room set-up. The implication was clear: *Friends* was moving the family discourse outside of its typical containment in the physical living room and into a more public setting. For the next 10 seasons, hundreds of conversations about life unfolded on the “living room” couch in Central Perk.

Friends’ mainstream success helped solidify the constructed family in the sitcom’s DNA. Because it prioritized character interactions over elaborate story-building, the show’s longevity all but guaranteed a tight-knit family would emerge by its completion. This technique is best exhibited through a careful look at each individual character arc on the show. The journey each character takes over the course of the series makes readily apparent *Friends*’ significance as a foundational forerunner for today’s constructed family sitcoms.

Chandler

There is perhaps no stronger example for the power of the relationships formed throughout the show than the character arc of Chandler Bing. In the pilot, Chandler fits the mold of a stunted, perpetually adolescent adult male. He is unable to take anything

seriously and is always trying to diffuse tension with a sarcastic comment or witty joke. Despite having a well-paying job, he continually speaks toward his distaste and disinterest in it. Additionally, he is notorious for his fear of commitment, instead preferring to play the field despite a horrible lack of self-confidence.

For the first several seasons, Chandler experiences little growth out of this mold, and is instead continually worn down by his own limitations and weaknesses. In the face of his friends' trials and tragedies, he is rarely able to console any of them or provide any form of wisdom, resorting to inappropriately timed one-liners. He proclaims this limitation to Rachel when she comes to him for advice, deflecting her approach by saying, "I'm not great at the advice. Can I interest you in a sarcastic comment?" ("The One with the Tea Leaves"). These social inadequacies haunt him for seasons on end as he tries to overcome his self-deprecating sense of humor and poor self-esteem.

The little time that he spends on his professional career functions almost exclusively as a joke. His job is literally the final punchline for an episode ("The One With the Embryos") where Monica and Rachel fail to guess what Chandler's job title actually is in order to win a friendly competition. His job title, IT Procurements Manager with the Specialization "Statistical Analysis and Data Reconfiguration," is ambiguous and confusing, devoid of all passion and personal investment. Chandler does not work in that field because he loves it, but rather because of the money. He is explicit about this on numerous occasions. Early in the series, after threatening to quit his job, his boss calls him on the phone to offer him a raise to stay onboard. Chandler initially holds his ground, informing his boss, "I need something that's more than just a job. I need something I care about" ("The One With the Stoned Guy"). However, after his boss persists with more

enticing financial incentive offers, Chandler caves and resumes his job. For almost the entirety of the series, Chandler's job acted as a painful means to an end for him.

His poor attempts at relationships early on also end miserably for Chandler. Whenever he tries to have an easy fling, he is either is humiliated and broken up with ("The One After the Super Bowl Part 2") or is unhappy with the relationship dynamics ("The One With the Butt") and terminates the relationship himself. On the few occasions when he is able to get a serious girlfriend, his vulnerability is always betrayed and he is cheated on. The abrasive Janice (Maggie Wheeler) returns to her ex-husband after promising to leave him for Chandler ("The One With the Giant Poking Device"), and after pining after Joey's ex-girlfriend Kathy (Paget Brewster) and dating her seriously for some time, he learns that she was cheating on him with a male coworker ("The One With Rachel's Crush").¹

It is not until the halfway point of the series that these devices that serve to keep Chandler down start to transform. Unsurprisingly, the inciting incident that begins this change is owed to another one of the friends in the group. While in London celebrating Ross's second (but not final) wedding, Chandler comforts a depressed Monica and the two end up spending the night together. What begins as an ill-advised one-night stand somehow transforms into a serious and committed relationship. Through this relationship, Chandler's self-made barriers begin to collapse. He goes on to date and marry Monica, which transforms his personality and outlook on life. When he proposes to Monica in "The One With the Proposal," he confesses to her, "I realized that the only thing that

¹ It is significant that in both of these instances Chandler started dating them while they were still in other relationships, highlighting both a lack of self-confidence and lack of maturity.

matters is you. You make me happier than I ever thought I could be. And if you'll let me, I will spend the rest of my life trying to make you feel the same way." This sentiment is nicely contrasted with a comment of his from the first season, where, upon learning that he has the chance to maintain a purely physical relationship with a beautiful woman, he says, "I get all the good stuff: All the fun, all the talking, all the sex, and none of the responsibility" ("The One With the Butt").² These comments oppose each other directly and highlight the significance of his journey in the show, one that is predicated on the input and care from the core group of friends of which he is a part.

Chandler's growth in his personal life flows directly into his professional life, as well. After nine seasons of ridicule and indecision in his profession, when he is forced to be away from Monica and the rest of the friends on Christmas because of his job, he decides to quit, proclaiming, "It was a stupid job and I could not stand leaving you. And why should I be the only one who doesn't get to do what he really wants to do?" ("The One With Christmas in Tulsa"). Chandler is explicit that his decision for leaving is motivated by his love for Monica and by a desire to finally begin to pursue his dreams, even if, as he admits, he does not know what they are just yet. The remainder of the show has Chandler transfer to a job in advertising, where he passionately pursues a career in which he is much more invested and one that he enjoys outside of financial benefits. Ultimately, this move represents a larger theme of growth and maturation initially incited by his affection for his wife and his friends.

² Chandler eventually does bow out of this arrangement, but not because of his desire for commitment so much as his inability to be only one of his lover's many sexual partners.

Rachel

While there is no explicitly stated protagonist of *Friends*, the most compelling case for one is most likely Rachel Green. The entire premise of the show is set in motion by Rachel's inclusion in the friend group. As such, it makes sense that her development would be most strongly indebted to the five other members. The little information revealed to the audience about Rachel's life suggests that she was a spoiled and unhappy rich girl who was stuck under the thumb of her controlling father. She was also getting ready to settle with someone she was not in love with, most likely from a pressure of expectations, as she laments early on in the show: "Didn't you think you would get married and settle down?" ("The One With the Sonogram at the End"). Because of this starting point, Rachel's journey toward completion is divided into two parts: stripping her life of all luxuries, bringing her down to her essentials, and then rebuilding her image outside of a definition of her biological family.

To get to her bare essentials, she foregoes a life of convenience and ease even before she is present on screen. Her decision to abandon her fiancé Barry (Mitchell Whitfield) at the altar marks a key transformational moment for Rachel toward taking a controlling interest in her own fate. Not only does this move alienate her from her family, friends, and, in effect, their lifestyle, it also inadvertently drives Barry into the arms of her best friend and maid of honor Mindy (Jana Marie Hupp), further severing her from her former life and leaving her with nothing by which to remember it. This is also

exacerbated by her new career choice as a waitress, something that would have been considered lowly in her previous life.³

Rachel is able to work her way out of a career she is tired of much more quickly than Chandler; in season two, she obtains a high-profile job in the fashion industry. This move establishes a new sense of confidence in herself and the skills that presumably were not present when she was with Barry. Her final decision to leave her waitressing job is instigated by Joey and Chandler, who encourage her to chase her dream job without the safety net of her current one (“The One Where Rachel Quits”). Their instigation of her career change represents a larger support system that Rachel is involved in with the entirety of her friend group. After quitting her job, she is able to land one in the fashion industry, where she spends the rest of the series moving around and ascending in rank. This again highlights the influence of the friends on her life.

Most of the heavy lifting of Rachel’s story gets dealt with early in the series with her leaving Barry and then later quitting her waitressing job. The rest of the series is her mostly continuing to embrace and grow in the role that she has forged for herself. Outside of micro moments of clarity and growth—dumping a young, immature boyfriend named Tag (Eddie Cahill) in favor of a serious relationship (“The One Where Everyone Turns 30”), taking on the task of single motherhood—Rachel mostly gets to reap the benefits of all her hard work from early in the series.

This remains the status quo for Rachel up until the final season, when she gets fired from Ralph Lauren. As a single mother now unemployed, she desperately searches for a new job, finally landing one that requires her to move to Paris. In a last-minute

³ In “The One With the Race Car Bed” this assumption is confirmed when Rachel’s dad refuses to tip the waiter at an expensive restaurant.

decision, she chooses to stay behind and be with Ross, and here her story comes full circle. She literally abandons her plans to leave for Paris while on the plane moments before takeoff, a move that mirrors her decision in the pilot to leave Barry at the altar. In choosing to leave behind her fashion job in Paris, she cultivates her progression. This action marks the significance of the relationships she has made while in New York. While getting into the fashion industry represented her freedom and independence earlier in the show's run, her decision to turn down this job makes explicit the fact that the friends back at Central Perk mean more to her than a glamorous job. Ultimately, she would rather be with the family she formed than away in Paris doing her dream job. In the pilot, she leaves the people she supposedly loves to pursue a more meaningful life, and in the finale there is an inversion of that action as she leaves this supposedly meaningful life to stay with the people she knows she loves.

Monica

While some tenants come and go throughout the series, the apartment where a large portion of the action takes place on *Friends* almost always has one constant: Monica Geller. As a quintessential Type-A character, it seems fitting that her apartment would be the epicenter for many of the characters' interactions. Her desire to control and organize the world to her liking is one of her major threads throughout the series, as she is most likely trying to control everything subconsciously to win the approval of her distant parents.

Overstating Monica's desire for control is nearly impossible. In nearly every facet of her life she desires either control or superiority over someone or something. She

continually looks to best her brother Ross (“The One With the Football,” “The One Where Ross Got High”), organize her friends’ (and sometimes strangers’) lives (“The One With the Dirty Girl”, “The One With Phoebe’s Wedding”), or make everything about her (“The One With Monica’s Thunder”). If the show possesses a flaw in its depiction of Monica, it is in the intensity of focus on her need for control, making any sort of growth from that almost unattainable.

Despite her rough exterior, Monica largely chases a desire to be a mother for the entirety of the show. At every point in her journey, this motivation drives her actions. Her first longtime significant other from the show, Richard Burke (Tom Selleck), ultimately forces Monica to terminate their relationship because of this. She tells him “I want to have a baby, but I don’t want to have one with someone who really doesn’t want to have one” (“The One With Barry and Mindy’s Wedding”). This breakup sends her into an extended state of depression that haunts her for multiple seasons emotionally, thereby highlighting the intensity Monica’s desire to be a mother.

Her two most significant traits—a controlling personality and desire for a child—collide at the end of the series to complete her character arc. Unlike Chandler, Monica’s issues are not ultimately resolved by their marriage, as her overbearing personality is still relentlessly present even in the time after the wedding. After Chandler and Monica decide to start trying to have kids, they quickly find out that they are unable to. This places Monica in a complicated position. She has defined herself so completely in terms of aspirant mother that she is ultimately forced to give up control in this situation. She and Chandler then try adoption, something very clearly not part of her original life plan.

Uptight Monica is forced to being more flexible and passive when life does not pan out like she planned.

In “The Last One,” this becomes even more apparent when, after finding out the mother who is giving up her child is in fact having twins, she again is forced to restructure her life plan. Upon learning the news of twins, Monica completes her arc by proclaiming, “We have waited so long for this. I don’t care if it’s two babies. I don’t care if it’s three babies. I don’t care if the entire cast of *Eight is Enough* comes out of there. We are taking them home because they are our children.” Crucially, it is Chandler, not Monica, who puts up resistance to twins initially, despite his general posture of calmness. Monica, though, in this moment is finally able to reassess how she forces structure on her life. Adoption was not part of the plan. Having twins was not part of the plan. Here she surrenders control of her situation by saying, “I don’t care,” and accepts the reality of her life with happiness.⁴

Joey

Joey is the sidekick. He is Barney Fife, Ed Norton, and Dwight Schrute. More so than the rest of the friends, he plays the roles of oblivious comic relief largely untethered from traditional human emotions and reactions. In practice, this takes the form of absurd comments such as Joey thinking his Adam’s Apple is called a “Joey’s Apple” (“The One Where They All Turn 30”). Because of his sidekick status, it is difficult to find the same

⁴ A strong argument can be made that a true moment of growth for Monica would have been the acceptance that she cannot have children and making peace with life not going according to her plan. While such claims are certainly valid and indicative of some of the show’s fundamental issues (which will be discussed in greater detail below), her being willing to adopt twins still signals this growth without undercutting the drive and dedication of Monica’s personality.

level of authenticity in character arc as is present in the rest of the cast. After hundreds of episodes of increasingly heightened antics, it becomes more challenging to create an emotionally resonant story.

Despite this setup, Joey still has places to grow throughout the run of the show. Similar to Chandler, Joey begins the show uninterested in settling down, preferring to play the field instead. Unlike Chandler, though, he is much better versed and far more capable than he is at dating and relationships. As the show progressed, Joey casually went from one sexual partner to another, with both his lack of commitment and promiscuity the source of jokes and sometimes even entire subplots (“The One With Joey’s Interview,” “The One With the Sharks”). Despite this, in the back half of the series, he gets the opportunity to “grow up” and develop the desire for a serious relationship.

Joey’s womanizer behavior mixed with his supposed lack of intelligence are the characteristics most often highlighted. Even if he found himself a consistent girlfriend, he was still usually uninterested in pursuing any sort of commitment with her (“The One with Joey’s New Girlfriend”). This trend sustains itself for most of the show, however it slowly starts to transform in the latter half once Joey switches roommates. After Chandler moves out to live with Monica and Phoebe and Rachel’s apartment is burnt down, Rachel moves into Joey’s apartment and their friendship begins to strengthen. If Joey’s advancement as a character can be attributed to any one of the friends, it is Rachel. While she is in the apartment with Joey, she is able to help him mature and grow up. In “The One Where Joey Dates Rachel” he begins to develop feelings for her. These newly found feelings somehow transform Joey’s outlook on life, and he starts to think about commitment in an entirely new way. The show ultimately jettisons this subplot in favor

of the fan favorite Ross and Rachel pairing, but its impact on Joey still lingers as the show concludes. He may be the only person who has not settled down by the end of the series, but his relationship with Rachel at the very least suggests that Joey has learned something and that progress is possible for him. In the short-lived spinoff *Joey* (2004), Joey furthers this progress by attempting a more serious outlook on relationships in general.

Phoebe

Similar to Joey, Phoebe is largely characterized as one of the sidekicks. Her antics are often equally as eccentric as Joey's. At various times through the show she legally changes her name to Princess Consuela Banana Hammock ("The One With Princess Consuela"), thinks Santa Claus is real ("The One Where Phoebe Hates PBS"), and keeps a litter of rat babies as pets ("The One With Phoebe's Rats"). Additionally, her attitude towards relationships is similar to that of Joey. She is outspoken on multiple occasions about her sex drive, her desire to juggle multiple sexual partners, and her general disinterest in settling down. However, unlike Joey, *Friends* spends much more time on developing Phoebe as a character and giving her a more complete arc.

This development is most significantly seen in her relationships with men. Her desire to not settle down could arguably be rooted in continual disappointment from fruitlessly trying and failing. In season one's "The One With the Monkey," she first meets love interest David (Hank Azaria) at one of her concerts. After striking up an intense romantic connection with him, he confesses that his work is moving him to Minsk. This devastation hangs in the background of all of Phoebe's actions from that

point on. David revisits the show several times on sporadic occasions, each time inspiring hope in Phoebe only to leave and break her heart all over again. In this light, the introduction of Mike Hannigan (Paul Rudd) represents a significant turn for Phoebe. After Joey sets them up on a blind date, Phoebe and Mike hit it off, eventually continuing to date and finally marrying in the last season. Getting married outside of Central Perk right after the conclusion of a fierce blizzard, it is in this moment that Phoebe's arc functionally comes to its completion.

There are few distinct milestones of Phoebe's growth as the result of the friends around her. Yet, in the final moments of her wedding, their relationships come into focus much more clearly. With Phoebe's cold and distant twin sister Ursula, absent father, and mother committing suicide when she was a child, family was always vacant in her life. While some of those relationships get some screen time with the intent of mending wounds—Phoebe meets her stepbrother, discovers her birth mother, and reconnects with her father—*Friends* continually places the importance of the relationships with her friends as paramount. Therefore, it is fitting that on her wedding day, the main cast of friends act out all of the familial roles. Instead of Ursula, Monica acts as the maid of honor. Instead of her father, Chandler is the one who gives her away. Additionally, Joey officiates the wedding while Rachel is a bridesmaid and Ross holds Mike's dog, acting as his best man. Giving her vows to Mike, Phoebe says, "When I was growing up, I didn't have a normal mom and dad, or a regular family like everybody else, and I always knew that something was missing. But now I'm standing here today, knowing that I have everything I'm ever gonna need, you are my family" ("The One with Phoebe's Wedding"). While she is speaking directly to Mike here, it would be incomplete to

suggest that this sentiment does not also extend to the rest of her constructed family acting in place of a biological family. Phoebe's wedding concludes her small arc quietly and without fanfare, but further cements the progress of the show towards the significance of the constructed family.

Ross

If any of the characters on *Friends* recognize the fact that they are playing a role in a sitcom, it is probably Ross Geller. Unfortunately for him, he has misdiagnosed himself as the nice guy who gets the girl in the end. Ross's journey over the course of *Friends* is in trying and continually failing to recognize this error, but still working toward correcting it. Unsurprisingly, he also happens to be the character whose journey is least rounded and most incomplete by the conclusion.

Ross's story is almost exclusively interesting in relation to Rachel Green, his longtime high school crush. The entire series is bookended by their will they/won't they dynamic, of which Ross is usually the catalyst for development. In the first half of the series, Ross largely acts from a place of entitlement that spoils many of the interactions in which he is a part. Chandler's mother accurately pinpoints this toxicity in "The One With Mrs. Bing" when, while talking to Ross about his pining after Rachel, tells Ross that he thinks, "She is supposed to end up with you." While it is not meant to come off as scathing, it is still a brutal diagnosis of Ross's condition. He thinks he is owed Rachel's affection simply because he is the "nice guy."

It takes various serious and humbling moments in order for Ross to begin to reevaluate his role in life. The first and most notorious of these is the first termination of his relationship with Rachel. After finally winning her affection and successfully dating

for some time, Ross's lack of self-confidence trumps his own happiness, and in a fit of depression he is unfaithful to Rachel. While the show continued to cheekily question whether he was actually at fault ("We were on a break!" would become an iconic reoccurring joke the writers would return to frequently), Rachel refused to forgive him, and Ross was forced to accept he had lost someone he thought was the love of his life. His grief is felt throughout the second half of the series and naturally carries a weight in the progression of his character.

The second humbling of Ross Geller is his entire fifth-season arc. After saying the wrong name at his wedding, his short lived and ill-conceived marriage to his boss's daughter Emily Waltham (Helen Baxendale) comes to an end. Right off the heels of that he is evicted from his apartment and forced to inconvenience Chandler and Joey by moving in with them. In "The One With Ross' Sandwich," his temper and self-entitlement gets the better of him and he is placed on indefinite leave from his paleontology position at the Museum of Natural History. From here he spends the next several seasons flailing and trying to regain control of his life. This involves dating a college student ("The One Where Ross Dates a Student") and drunkenly marrying and divorcing Rachel while in Las Vegas ("The One in Vegas Part 2").

Ross's life settles back down, and he secures a job as a professor at a local university. His remaining story mostly involves the continual return to the will they/won't they dynamic between him and Rachel. Failed attempt after failed attempt keep them apart as Ross always messes up opportunities to win back her affection, even conceiving a child with her in the process. In the last few episodes, after multiple near moments of reconciliation, Ross and Rachel finally put aside their differences and decide

to be together, a reunion that is somewhat conflicting. Even in the face of years of being humbled, Ross rarely shows the humility toward which his arc seems to be leading him. He may acknowledge that he's "done being stupid" when they reunite in the finale, but he still is not fully able to shed his insistence that he is a better guy than he is, as evidenced in "The One Where Joey Speaks French" when, after resisting advances from Rachel as she grieves her father's recent health issues, he tell himself "I should get a medal for that!" His self-congratulatory attitude undercuts the nature of his actions and still highlights that, even if he had been humbled and grew from years of mistakes, he still had a great deal of growing to do. Therefore, in many ways, Ross remains the least changed by a decade with this group of people, which only fuels the underlying tension of a show that provided comfort for its audiences while often refusing to redeem its characters completely.

Conclusion

Through these character interactions, a family emerged on *Friends*. In the closing moments of the finale, Monica and Chandler leave the apartment for the last time as they begin their move out of the city. As they both surrender their keys, one by one each of the rest of the gang reveals that they had duplicate key copies made at some point. The keys highlight the physical relation they all shared, literally having a stake in the same home, like a biological family would. Despite the lack of biological connection between most of the friends, they still formed a family together. In the concluding moments of the series, *Friends* explicitly states what it spent 10 seasons cultivating: the main characters of *Friends* were undoubtedly family.

However, even amidst all the friends helping each other and drawing closer together, the constructed family structure was still far from complete. The blend of comedy and sentiment often has uneven results, which provides several turbulent character moments. Even by the end of the show, Chandler still struggles to find the right words to comfort people, Monica still succumbs to bouts of egotism, and Ross still tries to play the victim. There were almost always lessons to be learned by the end of an episode, moments for the characters to grow and change, but too many times a punch line took precedent over a character moment. This is perhaps the accidental tension within the show: Were the characters flawed and dynamic individuals learning and growing, or just parrots for the writers' shrewdest punch lines? Even with so much evidence toward growth, the question is forever unresolved. TV was still perfecting the formula for the constructed family. To ponder this question is ultimately to miss the point of the impact of the show. Viewers dedicated hours of their lives tuning in week after week to see what the six main friends were up to. This consistency furthered what the sitcom has always been about: comfort. Even if the characters were not truly developing or actually growing in any meaningful way, *Friends* was at least effective at creating this illusion. This underlying tension ultimately answers the third question of this study. Despite characters that continually disappointed their own ethical standards, in light of their bond with each other and the audience, *Friends* cannot be looked at as anything other than a form of comfort.

CHAPTER FOUR

Greg Daniels and Michael Schur Workplace Sitcoms

I'd like to thank my community: My friends. It's a lesson that I have learned over and over again but it bears repeating. No one achieves anything alone.

- Leslie Knope, *Parks and Recreation*

The workplace sitcom is just as significant as the popularization of *Friends* to the cultivation of the constructed family sitcom. As mentioned previously, the workplace sitcom, which was initially popular in the 1970s, centers on a family beyond the biological, creating one of the most popular types of constructed families seen in sitcoms as a whole. Their recent reemergence at the turn of the 21st century speaks to the dominance of the constructed family as a sitcom format, with even more explicit familial themes than their 1970 counterparts.

Greg Daniels and Michael Schur are responsible, either collectively or individually, for the creation of some of the most influential and popular workplace sitcoms of past two decades. Because of their significance, as well the consistency of their topics, each of these sitcoms—*The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*—will be discussed in detail in this chapter. For most of the 21st century, Daniels and Schur have helped shaped the cultural impression of what constructed families look like in the workplace through a thematic consistency in all of their shows.

If the conversation about authorship in cinema is complicated and widely contested, then it only gets more difficult in the realm of television. Not only is there usually a writers' room for the show with a host of writers all contributing ideas to the

script being produced, all positions on the show—writers, directors, editors, etc.—frequently have multiple people occupying those positions over the course of a show’s run. This makes authorship a particularly difficult concept to define in television production. However, over the course of television history, one title has slowly emerged as the most viable option for defining a show’s author, that of the “showrunner.” The primary debate inherent in this topic is whether or not the network truly has final authorship on the television product that makes it to the screen. While showrunners may not have had as much substantial creative weight in the past, the industry has slowly been shifting in their favor recently. Starting with the advent of original programming on HBO and culminating with a more writer friendly model on streaming services, network executives have consistently been less demanding of specific content and creative direction (Lotz; Smith and Telang).

A vivid example is found in the mystery crime show *Twin Peaks* (1990), which centered on the murder of local prom queen Laura Palmer. After ratings began to slip, showrunners Mark Frost and David Lynch were forced by the network executives to drastically change the course of its plot—by revealing Laura Palmer’s killer halfway through season two—to try and improve ratings (Rodley). The rest of the season suffered as a result. Reflecting on this decision, Lynch recalls, 'Who killed Laura Palmer' was a question that we did not ever really want to answer. And at a certain point we were told we needed to wrap that up and it never really got going again after that" (“Twin Peaks Creator David Lynch Says Killer Reveal Killed the Original Series”). Lynch brought back *Twin Peaks* for a third season in 2017, which has been noted for the hands-off approach by the network. That hands-off approach is now much more common in

television today. Control of the show is more much focused on the creative writers involved.

Those creatives, then, that have the most power are the showrunners. *Los Angeles Times* writer Scott Collins speaks about showrunners by describing them as:

a curious hybrid of starry-eyed artists and tough-as-nails operational managers. They're not just writers; they're not just producers. They hire and fire writers and crew members, develop story lines, write scripts, cast actors, mind budgets and run interference with studio and network bosses. It's one of the most unusual and demanding, right-brain/left-brain job descriptions in the entertainment world (B. S. Collins).

This suggests that they are the bridge between the creative and the corporate. It distills all of those various responsibilities down to one person, created to "identify the producer who actually held ultimate management and creative authority for the program... It had got to the stage where it was incredibly confusing; there were so many production credits no one knew who was responsible" (Blundell). Therefore, this position allowed for a final say on all things creative on the show. There is no one way to be a showrunner, but today it is rarely disputed that the showrunner is the person creatively in charge (Bennett).

In these three main sitcoms, Daniels and Schur either share or solely claim the role of show creator or showrunner, meaning that their voices are dominant in the creation and execution of the series of which they are a part. In addition to each having executive producing roles on these shows, they are largely responsible for writing or directing the most significant episodes of each of the series. The pilot of *The Office* is co-written by Greg Daniels, Daniels and Schur both wrote the pilot of *Parks and Recreation* with Daniels directing it, and Schur co-wrote the pilot for *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* as well.¹

¹ Dan Goor must also be spoken about here briefly. While perhaps not as known as Greg Daniels or Michael Schur, he still has written and directed a significant number

They are also responsible for writing and often directing the finales for each of these shows. While there is not a written rule that correlates pilots and finales with authorship, this certainly is a common occurrence in television shows. Dan Harmon is responsible for the pilot and finale of *Community*, Larry David for the pilot and finale of *Seinfeld*, and David Crane and Marta Kauffman for the pilot and finale of *Friends*.² Further, it follows that the most creatively influential people would be in charge of the most crucial moments in the show. The success of these shows is often dependent on how well significant and cornerstone episodes are made, so the people who are both in charge and creatively most dominant are usually tasked with penning or directing these episodes. For the purposes of this subject matter, their authorship in each of these shows stresses their frequent thematic reoccurrence of the constructed family in the workplace concept. Further, just as Norman Lear-run shows shaped the discourse of the family decades ago, these shows do the same in the modern-day setting.

Michael Scott as the Head of the Family in The Office

Adapted from the British sitcom of the same name and developed primarily by Greg Daniels (though Michael Schur would quickly become one of the dominant voices in the writers' room), *The Office* explores the family dynamics among coworkers at the fictional Dunder Mifflin Paper Company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. These developments

of these shows as well, even co-creating *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* with Schur. Even though he is not included in great detail in this chapter, his contribution is certainly worth mentioning.

² All of these people have been largely shown to be the driving force of their sitcoms as well. These are three isolated examples, but ones that represent a massive trend in the industry: The most significant creators are responsible for series premieres and finales.

take place differently than they do on *Friends*. *Friends* had six primary characters, while at any given time *The Office* was developing up to 18 different primary and secondary characters.³ Therefore, an individual character analysis is simply impractical. Although *The Office* and its multitude of characters is deserving of many avenues of analysis, for the purposes of this study and in order to best answer the three research questions, I will focus primarily on the attempts of protagonist and boss Michael Scott to create a family with the employees of Dunder Mifflin.

More than anything else, Michael Scott wants to be loved. Being a child of divorce and the victim of a childhood filled with ridicule and isolation (“Phyllis’s Wedding”; “Gossip”) meant that Michael grew up without the affirmation and love he desperately desires. Most likely because of this, he has developed into a man-child. This is made evident on multiple occasions, such as in the episode “The Initiation,” in which his coworkers are forced to keep tabs on his daily productivity to make sure he stays on task,⁴ in “The Coup,” in which he is reprimanded for hosting a weekly movie viewing session during work hours; and in “Café Disco,” in which he pretends to be a robot until someone removes his “battery” and he “shuts down.” These are only a few examples of the dozens of instances where Michael reverts to childlike behavior in a workplace setting, when ultimately he just wants to be loved and feel connected in a family. In “Take Your Daughter to Work Day,” an old childhood video of Michael’s highlights a connection in his mind between having a family and making friends. In the video, he

³ Michael Scott (Steve Carrell), Jim Halpert (John Kransinski), Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer), and Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson) are the most prominent characters on the show.

⁴ His daily tasks mostly consist of taking naps, listening to loud music, eating soft pretzels, and doing Bill Cosby impressions.

states, “I wanna be married and have 100 kids so I can have 100 friends. And no one can say no to being my friend.” Further, since Michael was unable to make these important familial connections as a child, both alienating him and preventing his maturation, he goes looking for love and affirmation in the office.

Particularly in the early seasons, Michael’s attempts to create a family at Dunder Mifflin are met with constant resistance from nearly everyone in the office. Despite continually being disappointed, he desperately desires to be both their boss and their father figure. In “The Carpet,” he insists, “You can love a boss like you love a father” while being immediately told, “That never happens.” In “Branch Wars,” when the Utica branch tries to recruit salesman Stanley Hudson (Leslie David Baker), Michael tells their manager, “You cannot tear Stanley from his family like this ... his work family,” despite Stanley willingly seeking out the job transfer. The entire show is saturated with moments like these, where Michael forces moments that explicitly evoke family constructs onto a workplace environment with terrible results. He chooses to air out workplace disputes in a large family meeting style as opposed to a more professional method (“Conflict Resolution”), makes employee Dwight Schrute do laundry—similar to a parent giving a child extra chores—for misconduct in the office (“The Coup”), hijacks a Christmas party to run an intervention for a drunk employee (“Moroccan Christmas”), and reprimands the office for not taking better care of him after he burns his foot on a George Foreman Grill (“The Injury”). Each of these instances ends negatively for Michael and dampens the morale of the workplace in general.

Amidst these failures, there are still a few moments of saving grace for Michael throughout the run of the show. These instances show Michael as a legitimate father

figure in the office, each mapping the progression of a father raising a child through different stages of life and serving to reinforce the show's ability to craft a constructed family even in the face of so many failures from Michael himself.

The first example of Michael as a father figure takes place during season two's "Booze Cruise" and mirrors the relationship between a father and his teenaged son. After failing to inspire the members of the office on a work retreat—another instance of failed unity at his hands—he gets a personal one-on-one moment with Jim Halpert, who has been unsuccessful pining after the engaged Pam. Michael takes Jim under his wing and offers him encouragement and support, telling him to “never, ever, ever give up” (“Booze Cruise”). The sincerity of his advice and the simplicity with which it is spoken suggests a paternal tone, one akin to a father helping his son deal with a childhood crush. This is one of the first moments where the audience gets to see Michael forming a real and authentic bond with the members of his office.

Later in season three, he gets a chance to further cultivate his position as father figure to the rest of the office. In “Business School,” Pam Beesly premieres her modest artwork at a local gallery, inviting the entire office to attend. For a variety of reasons, almost no one bothers to come. Even worse, those who do come ridicule her work behind her back, calling it “motel room art,” and she is understandably devastated. However, at the end of the night, Michael, who was held up at a previous event, races across town to view her art before the exhibition concludes. He marches in and dubs her “Pam-Casso,” complimenting the superlative nature of her work. After asking her if he can buy one of the paintings to hang in the office—which mirrors a father hanging his child's artwork on the refrigerator—he affectionately and tenderly tells her, “I am really proud of you.”

Again, the simplistic choice of language along with the intimate delivery conveys the impression of a father speaking to his daughter. But, in contrast with the first example, this showcases a child at an older stage of life. Jim represented the child in adolescent years, and here Pam represents the young adult, trying to strike out on her own, specifically by developing her art career. His comment causes Pam to break down, cry, and embrace Michael, showing that not only does he feel like a proud father, but Pam also feels valued and accepted as a daughter. This interaction furthers Michael's arc with his employees and shows his ability to act as the father of their constructed family.

The final example again mirrors the maturation process of raising a child. Years later in season six's "Murder," when the office is distracted by rumors regarding the security of their jobs, Michael executes an elaborate murder mystery game to help take their minds off it. This is met with resistance from Jim—who is acting as co-manager at the time—and he confronts Michael one-on-one. In this confrontation, Michael drops his façade, raising his voice and shouting, "You shut up. They need this game, Jim. Let us have this stupid little game, all right?" ("Murder"). Shortly afterwards, Jim receives news that the rumors are more substantial than previously thought, and he chooses to help Michael keep the game going to occupy the staff's attention. At the end of the day, Jim reflects on this, saying, "If you're a family stuck on a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean, one parent might want to just keep rowing. But, if the other parent wants to play a game, it's not because they're crazy. It's because they're doing it for the kids. And I get that now" ("Murder"). Again, a familial reference is made, this time explicitly from one of the ostensible members of the family themselves, rather than just Michael as their father-figure wannabe. In this instance, Michael gets to act as a mentor to one of his "children,"

continuing the parenting he has done up until this point. Jim is in a managerial position now and is still learning how to lead the office.⁵ Michael's instincts on how to take care of the office end up being correct, and Jim ultimately has to learn from Michael's experience and decision-making skills. This exchange is like a son growing up and starting his own family, but still realizing that he needs help from his father. Their relationship and interactions bring the arc of Michael as a parent toward its completion.

By the end of the seventh season, Michael has met the love of his life and chooses to move to Colorado to be with her and get married. In the episode "Goodbye, Michael," (Written by Greg Daniels) he gives his final farewells in the office. Continuing the idea of Michael as father of the office, the episode can be read as the passing away of a parent—Michael even bequeaths various items to members of the office, much like a father making a will and laying out inheritances for his children. The entire episode is full of last moments that indicate both the closure of his existence in their lives and the endurance of the emotional connection he has created with them.⁶ At the end of the day, as Michael begins to leave the office for the final time, he turns around to watch all of the employees of Dunder Mifflin in the daily grind. Because he has lied about the date of his flight, they barely notice him leaving. He takes one more look at his family, acknowledging that they have moved on and that he has raised them as best he could; now he has to let them go and leave.

⁵ This is teased earlier in "Survivor Man" when Jim temporarily takes over the branch while Michael is away. He manages the office poorly and Michael comes in at the end to console and encourage him, again showing his paternal instincts.

⁶ Highlights include a paintball game with Dwight, a tearful goodbye with Jim, and a farewell at the airport with Pam.

For the two final seasons, the office functions without their primary father figure,⁷ further proving how Michael had “raised” them to no longer need him. However, it is not until the final episode that they finally begin to realize what Michael had known all along. By the end of the series, most of the characters in the office having either left or been promoted out of the branch, only the wedding of Dwight and Angela Martin (Angela Kinsey) bringing everyone together again. In the last moments of the final episode, they all sit around the office together for the last time. Here they are able to process the closing of this chapter of their lives, each character getting a moment to vocalize their feelings during this change. Warehouse manager Darryl Philbin aptly reflects, “Everyday when I came into work, all I wanted to do was leave. So why in the world does it feel so hard to leave right now?” (“Finale”). As if to make the point even more explicitly, office weirdo Creed Bratton says, “It all seems so very arbitrary. I applied for a job at this company because they were hiring. I took a desk at the back because it was empty. But, no matter how you get there or where you end up, human beings have this miraculous gift to make that place home.” This line functions as an explicit connection toward the constructed family and also comes across as the thesis statement for the entire show. The employees of Dunder Mifflin, against all odds, made this place their home and created a family there, which highlights the grand irony as well as the true beauty of *The Office*: Michael spends seven seasons trying to force authentic relationships and force a family to form at Dunder Mifflin, but it is only after he leaves to start his own family and when everyone else finally leaves the office that they realize that

⁷ Salesman Andy Bernard (Ed Helms) takes over as manager, which calls back to Michael’s final interaction with him where he encouraged him to believe in himself more and be more ambitious.

what Michael had been trying to force them to see had become a reality. They had become a family.

Cultivation of a Community in Parks and Recreation

While it takes Michael leaving for *The Office* for the other characters to appreciate their constructed family, Leslie Knope, the Deputy Director of the Parks and Recreation Department, is able to forge an even tighter family without having to leave in *Parks and Recreation*. The focus on the constructed family on *Parks and Rec* is less on resistance and more on increased cultivation. *Parks and Recreation* follows the staff of the Parks and Recreation department of the small, fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. Much like *The Office*, the show thrives on its well-developed characters and the relatable, common workplace events that transpire in their government department, ranging from determining objects to place in a time capsule (“Time Capsule”), to planning various events for the citizens of Pawnee (“Go Big or Go Home”). *Parks and Rec* focuses on a much smaller cast of characters than *The Office*—around nine or 10—and develops each of their character interactions together to help cultivate a constructed family over the course of seven seasons. As a result, the family develops slightly differently from *The Office* and works around not one, but two central parental figures.

Leslie Knope is a firm believer that good can be done in the world, which she exhibits in her behavior on her job and how she conducts her personal life. That work ethic naturally births a desire to create a family within the workplace. She sees the creation of the workplace family as a direct overflow from the passion of her work and the people around her. Leslie cares about everyone with whom she interacts and chooses

to create a family from that care, which marks her as distinctly different from Michael Scott, who wants a family out of desperation. The Parks and Recreation department is therefore much more easily convinced to connect with her and each other. As a result, the arc of the show and of the family members forming within it comes from Leslie identifying the most compelling trait in each of the characters and cultivating it. This results in both personal growth for the characters and the development of a familial bond between and among them.

Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman), the head of the Parks Department in Pawnee, on the other hand, is much more cynical and less invested in work in government. As a strong conservative, he is a firm believer in hands-off governance, saying, “I think that all government is a waste of taxpayer money. My dream is to have the park system privatized and run entirely for profit by corporations, like Chuck E. Cheese. They have an impeccable business model. I would rather work for Chuck E. Cheese” (“Pilot”). Ron also has the least tolerance for forced family structured in the office, continually citing his desire for privacy as well as his distaste for overt affection. Both of these traits puts him in direct opposition with Leslie at numerous points throughout the show, as she is extremely enthusiastic about the hands-on role of government and is passionate about letting her coworkers know how much she cares for them. But, despite their differing demeanors, they help make the mother/father family dynamic that dictates the environment of the department.

While there is never even a suggestion of a romantic relationship between Leslie and Ron, they still function as both supportive spouses to each other and parents to the rest of the Parks Department. Leslie is continually working to connect with Ron and

show him that she cares for him. Whenever he “relapses” and reconnects with his vicious and controlling ex-wife Tammy (Megan Mullally), she refuses to let him remain content in that relationship (“Tammy”); after finally figuring out when his birthday is, she plans a party for him that ends up just being him alone in a comfy chair with a steak dinner, his ideal birthday activity (“Eagleton”); and, as a Christmas gift to him, she installs remote-controlled doors on his office to allow him to easily dismiss unwanted visitors (“Citizen Knope”). For the course of the show’s run, she consistently reaches out and meets Ron at his level, offering him support and care in any situation. Inversely, even as Ron proves to be less overt about the emotional attachments in his life, it is clear he cares deeply for Leslie even though he often disagrees with her. Despite not being invested in his government job, he dedicates his life to helping her run for public office, offering his services as well as a great deal of his time to a cause to which he has only tertiary connections. When Leslie exhausts herself trying to run for office and still work at the Parks Department, he confronts her with love and insists she take a leave from the department to focus on her campaign, telling her “never half-ass two things, whole-ass one thing” (“Sweet Sixteen”). Both of them offer support and care for the other in a way that strongly resembles a husband-and-wife relationship.

As equal partners, they each get opportunities to mentor and instruct the employees of the Parks Department in ways that deepen the bond they share as a family unit in the workplace. Andy Dwyer (Chris Pratt), Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari), and April Ludgate (Aubrey Plaza), the three most juvenile characters in the show, each receive extensive support from both of the “parental figures” of the Parks Department. Ron repeatedly offers advice and help to the immature man-child Andy Dwyer, helping

him train to become a police officer, paying for his college education (“Smallest Park”), and even once taking him to the dentist when he breaks his tooth (“Galentine’s Day”). Leslie gets fewer interactions with Andy, but still has to mother him at times, the most blatant and comedic of instances being when she agrees to buy him any two candies of his choosing at the grocery store. (“Flu Season”).⁸

On multiple occasions, Ron funds slacker Tom Haverford’s absurd business ideas, supporting him each time they fail and still offering advice and encouragement for his future in business. When Tom’s first try at business fails, Leslie is also there to offer support. After an entire evening where Tom selfishly makes a fundraiser for Leslie all about his company Entertainment 720, Leslie confronts him. In the span of just a few minutes, she scolds him for his selfish and rude behavior—in this instance shoving him underwater in a hot tub⁹—then comforts him after learning that his business is failing. Her range of responses and behavior mimic how a parent would care and love for a child.

Both Ron and Leslie mentor April Ludgate extensively to help her solidify her own career in government. Ron takes her on as an assistant after she interns in the Parks Department, and Leslie actively encourages her into positions of increased power and authority. Ron goes from offering her dating advice, to giving input for her career path over the course of the series. Leslie motivates her to advance higher into government when she leaves the Parks Department to focus on her political campaign. Their

⁸ The mother/child dynamic is pushed even further when Andy returns with a massive jar of gummy bears, insisting that it only counts as one piece of candy.

⁹ In the context of the scene and the episode, this action is played in a comedic and exaggerated manner. This scene in no way evokes any form of abuse from Leslie to Tom, but in the world of the sitcom works both as slapstick humor and an overflow of Leslie’s disapproval.

mentorship of April continues to solidify the role that Leslie and Ron play in the Parks Department as “parents” to the employees.

There are a variety of other characters in *Parks and Recreation* who also contribute to the formation of the family. However, unlike the characters already discussed, they do not fit neatly into previously defined family roles. Ann Perkins (Rashida Jones) is a nurse at Pawnee General Hospital and Leslie’s best friend. Leslie is often quite maternal with Ann, screening every man she dates and offering thoughtful and over-the-top gifts in excess. But, their relationship is more peer-based than some of the others in the department. The two friends also function in a kind of sisterhood, not exclusively mother/daughter or sister/sister. The role played by Chris Traegar (Rob Lowe) and Ben Wyatt (Adam Scott) is similar in this sense. They enter the show in season three tasked with cutting the Parks Department budget. As a result, they are met largely with antagonism at first. However, they are soon welcomed into the family and take up permanent positions in the office. Ben goes on to marry Leslie and Chris to marry Ann. Despite being explicit about never being able to settle down anywhere (“Leslie and Ben”), they are able to find a home and a family in Pawnee.

The culmination of all of these ideas comes in what is often considered the strongest episode of the series. In the season seven episode “Leslie and Ron,” after years of fighting result in them not speaking to each other, the two are locked in the Parks Department overnight to talk through their problems.¹⁰ With nowhere to hide, they are forced to confront their issues and incidentally also reminisce on their years of friendship.

¹⁰ The years of silence between the two was never shown onscreen, as the inciting incident and the subsequent fallout happen in the time jump between seasons six and seven. For more on the time jump and its behind-the-scenes reasons, see the Yahoo! Entertainment interview with Michael Schur (Nemetz).

Neither initially want to talk about their problems, but as the night wears on they find themselves slipping into discussions about their past. Their fight, brought on by a variety of complex circumstances that place both of them at fault, is ultimately resolved by the morning. However, more important is the revelations made about their friendship. Despite insisting that they were only work acquaintances, Ron admits that he tried to ask her for a job in the federal government just to be closer to her. He also reveals his initial thoughts of her when he first hired her, reading back comments he wrote after he interviewed her: “Leslie Knope is an absurd idealist whose political leanings are slightly to the left of Leon Trotsky ... If we were to work together she would undoubtedly drive me insane and it is possible that we would murder each other ... Hire her” (“Leslie and Ron”). Both of these stories point out Ron’s affection and care for Leslie even though he strongly disagrees with her in countless ways. The episode reminds the viewer how much of a workplace couple they are. They accept each other for who they are and have positively changed the lives of everyone in the Parks Department. The closing shot of the episode features the two of them walking away together, arms around one another, talking about their shared love of breakfast food. This shot—in addition to making a reference back to a previous conversation between the two of them—evokes an old married couple. The manner in which they hold each other is loving, but not romantic. By closing the episode with this shot, the show solidifies their dynamic as the parental figures in the office, bringing the constructed family idea in *Parks and Recreation* full circle.

While certainly rife with similarities, *Parks and Recreation* still contrasts *The Office*. As opposed to one person trying to impose a family on the entire office, the Parks

Department of Pawnee is much more receptive to family structures within the workplace. Countless times throughout the series, the idea of family is affirmed and reinforced (“Go Big or Go Home”; “Emergency Response”; “Moving Up Part 1 and 2”). Therefore, *Parks and Recreation*’s significance is not in its similarities of family structures with *The Office*, but rather its stark differences. The family in *Parks and Recreation* shows that there is not one type of family. By making the group dynamics so different from that of Dunder Mifflin, Schur and Daniels indicate that, while the constructed family may be a new dominant force within the television sitcom, the type of constructed family can still drastically differ from series to series.

Furthering the Family with Brooklyn Nine-Nine

Created by Michael Schur and Dan Goor, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* centers on the daily grind of the 99th police precinct in New York City, which matches the general set-up of *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*. The show also takes a collection of idiosyncratic characters and derives its humor from their interactions in the workplace. Therefore, what follows is just a brief analysis of the familial themes developed here to highlight how *Nine-Nine* continues to reinforce ideas of a constructed family in a workplace setting.

Unlike the first two shows, *Nine-Nine* is not centered on someone in any type of leadership position. Jake Peralta (Andy Sandberg) is a talented but carefree detective, combining the passion of Leslie Knope with the immaturity of Michael Scott; in the pilot, he is described as the 99th’s “best detective ... but the only puzzle he hasn’t solved is how to grow up” (“Pilot”). Along with Jake are a variety of other detectives and office personnel: Type A detective Amy Santiago (Melissa Fumero), bumbling detective

Charles Boyle (Joe Lo Truglio), short-fused detective Rosa Diaz (Stephanie Beatriz), body-builder sergeant Terry Jeffers (Terry Crews), oddball assistant Gina Lynette (Chelsea Peretti), and the lazy duo Hitchcock (Dirk Blocker) and Skully (Joel McKinnon Miller). Their world is transformed when the new no-nonsense Captain Raymond Holt (Andre Braugher) takes over the precinct, cracking down on office shenanigans.¹¹ While he is immediately cold and distant, the progression of the show finds the rest of the *Nine-Nine* warming up to the strict captain. As a result, a family begins to develop. But, since the show does not focus on a leader as a mother or father figure, the ultimate twist with *Nine-Nine* is that it is not about a parental figure trying to create a family, but rather characters trying to create a parent from a member of the police department. This is best realized in Jake's relationship with Captain Holt.

Holt and Jake immediately get off on the wrong foot, with Holt catching Jake doing robot impressions of the captain behind his back. The entirety of the pilot features a contentious relationship between them, with only the closing moments of the episode suggesting that they could forge a positive relationship. This, in turn, marks the balancing act of the show. Much like the relationship between a father and a son, the two bicker and disagree constantly, Captain Holt's rigid and stoic personality butting up against the lackadaisical and immature spirit of Jake.

Once the audience learns the background of Jake's father, the relationship between him and Holt begins to make more sense. Jake's father does not get much screen time throughout the series, however it is quickly established that he is not an ideal role model, having left Jake and his mom when Jake was seven. In the season two episode

¹¹ The show offers a snippet of an event called "Fire Extinguisher Roller Chair Derby" to show evidence of typical shenanigans.

“Captain Peralta,” the audience gets their first exposure to Roger Peralta when he reappears in Jake’s life for the first time in six years. Despite being such a distant father, Jake still views Roger as his hero, as evidenced by his unquestioned belief that his dad is the best pilot in the air. While Jake hopes that this reunion will rekindle a relationship between them—describing an evening together with his dad that resembles a date, he haphazardly says “I don’t know what fathers and sons do, but I’m gonna find out!”—it quickly becomes clear that his father is only using him to get clear of drug possession charges for which he claims he was framed. Together Jake and Charles solve the case and clear Roger of his charges, but in the process learn that he is not as reputable of a person as Jake imagined him. When Roger bails on their celebration party, Jake finally sees his father for who he is and goes to confront him, telling him to leave him alone until he is ready to be a father. The episode concludes with Holt approaching Jake and paying for his drink. Jake interprets this as receiving an allowance from the captain, which Holt denies. Still, in the very next beat, he grabs Jake by the shoulder affectionately and tells him that he is proud of him. This early episode makes two things abundantly clear. First, it establishes Jake’s desire for the captain to fill the father role that has been vacant for much of his life, as evidenced by his eagerness to make the ludicrous assumption that he was receiving an allowance. Secondly, Holt shows through his actions that he is willing to begin to fill that role in Jake’s life.

The next several seasons continue to flesh out this dynamic, allowing the two of them to build a rapport. During this time, Jake punches a journalist who insults Holt by calling him a “homo” (“Old School”), gives up credit for one of the best busts of his career in order to get the Captain back to the precinct (“The Oolong Slayer”), and enters

the witness protection program with Holt and bands together with him to survive in isolation (“Coral Palms Part 1, 2, and 3”). Since, at the time of this writing, the show is still ongoing and currently halfway through its fifth season—most projections suggest that it will get at the very most one more season—Jake and Holt’s narrative arc is still incomplete. Nevertheless, Schur and Goor will hit major familial beats in the same way that Daniels and Schur did on *The Office* and *Park and Recreation* did during their runs.¹² The relationship between Jake and Holt is a primary indicator that *Nine-Nine* will continue to follow in the footsteps of the workplace sitcoms before it and foster an environment for a constructed family to form.

Outside of Jake’s search for a father figure, the rest of the precinct grows organically together as a family. That central concept is teased in the pilot episode when Captain Holt insists that everyone on the squad wear ties, which Jake realizes represents the unity of their team. This is immediately reinforced as the team makes an arrest by surrounding their target, their teamwork contributing to making the final bust in the end. Unity is a theme that gets played out continually in the series. In “Tactical Village,” the squad bands together to set the best course record on a training drill; in “Jimmy Jab Games,” they playfully disregard work to participate in a series of workplace-themed games; and in each of the five Halloween-themed episodes, they take part in a good-natured competition to prove who is the “Ultimate Detective/Genius.” Beyond the normal expectation for police work, members of the squad often put themselves in harm’s way to help each other, even if it breaks protocol. They disobey direct orders to help Jake and

¹² This is particularly likely as the end of season five is expected to conclude with Jake and Amy’s wedding, which will certainly involve Captain Holt playing a significant father role in the ceremony.

Holt when they are placed in witness protection, resulting in a hazardous shootout in an arcade (“Coral Palms Part 3”). They also risk their lives to clear Jake and Rosa for a crime they did not commit, even pursuing the cause after they are sentenced and put into prison (“The Big House Part 1 and 2”). These are just a handful of instances of familial moments spread throughout the run of the show. To further the point even more, many episodes conclude with the crew chanting their precinct number “Nine-Nine!” in unison, acting as almost a catchphrase for the entire show. Considering that this sentimental cheer often follows an emotional catharsis (“Thanksgiving”; “New Captain”) or group victory (“Greg and Larry”; “Last Ride”; “The Big House Part 2”), it allows them to identify specifically with their workplace and as a collective unit while also underscoring the unity they feel as coworkers and, more importantly, as family. Since they are part of the same team, this chant plays like a rallying cry, bonding them together in celebration. Seen in another light, they are all part of the same family—members of the Nine-Nine—and this chant works as an effective reinforcement of that construct.

Considering the setting of the show, it is not surprising that themes of unity and support are frequently emphasized. Yet, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* consistently pushes those ideas further and refuses to make the show about a handful of just coworkers. Sergeant Jeffers insists on that when he explicitly makes the connection beyond the workplace, telling the squad, “We’re a family. We’re strong, and together we can do anything” (“New Captain”). They exist firmly as a family on the show, just as effectively and intimately as *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*. Family is inherent to all three of these workplace sitcoms, and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is significant because it reinforces the

paramount nature of exploring family dynamics in the workplace. The constructed family is not merely a fad, but a central, dynamic, unifying theme with great staying power.

Conclusion

In many ways, the sitcoms created and run by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur are reminiscent of the ones created by Norman Lear in the 1970s. As discussed in chapter two, Lear's sitcoms were culturally defining shows that both reflected and helped to shape the era's cultural and political landscape. All of the shows analyzed in this chapter operate in the same capacity: They each received incredible viewership numbers for the majority of their run,¹³ widespread critical acclaim,¹⁴ and popularity on online platforms.¹⁵ If Daniels and Schur had created a single show with these themes, it might be written off as a fluke, but with three shows of five or more seasons—as well as two seasons of the afterlife-based sitcom *The Good Place* (2016), which also extensively deals with the constructed family—Daniels and Schur have established their voice and interpretation of the sitcom family as dominant and culturally significant.

While each illustrates the concept in different ways, all three shows develop a family in the workplace over the course of their runs. Despite their different methods,

¹³ While *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* were both in danger of being cancelled at various points throughout their run, they both were still highly watched and discussed when they were on air.

¹⁴ In addition to all appearing on IMDb's Top 250 TV shows, combined these three shows have six Emmy wins and 59 nominations and four Golden Globe wins and 16 nominations.

¹⁵ While no official numbers have been released, *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* have remained on Netflix for several years now, which usually indicates extensive popularity.

they all connect back to the idea of comfort in the sitcom family. Each show continually establishes the idea of a family forming in any and every context. Whether in an East Coast paper company, a Midwestern parks department, or a New York City police precinct, families can and will be formed. Beyond that, the types of families that form are distinctly different from each other. Michael's relationship style with Dwight does not exist in any capacity on the other shows, nor does Leslie's bond with Ann or Gina's with Captain Holt. While the family dynamics may be different, the authenticity of their emotions is consistent. The popularity of Daniels's and Schur's workplace sitcoms points toward a correlation of the constructed family in the workplace sitcom with an acceptance of a new status quo. The repeated implementation of these relationships and their widespread popularity highlight the level of comfort the audience obtains from watching them. In the very final moment of *The Office*, during an interview, Pam Beesly, often used as the emotional surrogate for the show's audience, addresses the camera directly and says "There's a lot of beauty in ordinary things. That's kind of the point, isn't it?" ("Finale"). This assertion forces a comparison between the banality of the workplace and the beauty of forming real connections in them. According to Daniels and Schur, the family can be anywhere, even in the office. This is the underlying theme of these shows, one that speaks to their popularity and ultimately their ability to cultivate a sense of comfort. *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* spend years reinforcing the same idea that family can be found even in the most unlikely places. For a world that often dreads their daily work, this is the source of great comfort.

CHAPTER FIVE

Community as a Meta Commentary on the Sitcom

So maybe we are caught in an endless cycle of screw ups and hurt feelings, but I choose to believe that this is just the universe's way of molding us into some kind of super group.

-Jeff Winger, *Community*

Created by Dan Harmon, the NBC sitcom *Community* is set at the fictional Greendale Community College in Colorado and follows a group of misfits in a study group growing together in friendship. The group is led by ex-lawyer Jeff Winger (Joel McHale), and he is accompanied by pseudo-political activist Britta Perry (Gillian Jacobs), uptight bookworm Annie Edison (Alison Brie), single mother Shirley Bennett (Yvette Nicole Brown), former high school quarterback Troy Barnes (Donald Glover), pop culture-obsessed Abed Nadir (Danny Pudi), and the racist and elderly Pierce Hawthorne (Chevy Chase).¹

The narrative is set in motion when Jeff agrees to tutor Britta in Spanish in order to seduce her. His ploy quickly gets out of control and he inadvertently becomes the leader of an entire Spanish study group. While Jeff is initially reluctant to participate in the relationships formed within the study group, *Community* quickly becomes the story of characters growing together and enduring life's challenges as a family. Jeff describes this phenomenon aptly at the end of season two by calling them "some kind of super group.... like the Traveling Wilburys of Pain. Prepared for any insane adventure life throws our

¹ Within the context of the show, the group is often referred to as "The Greendale Seven."

way” (“Paradigms of Human Memory”). At Greendale Community College, the characters are treated to a myriad of insane adventures over the course of six seasons that make apparent one of the strongest and most noteworthy renditions of the constructed family in contemporary television.

In *Community*, all the elements of the present day sitcom are made evident. The show is deeply rooted in a variety of postmodern ideals, the most prominent of which is the constructed family. The main characters on *Community* not only comprise one of the most explicit iterations of the constructed family, but their group dynamics continually deconstruct and highlight the core elements of the constructed family paradigm.

Community is crucial for discussion here because, while it covers much of the ideas of family already discussed, the entirety of the show is specifically *about* the makeup of the sitcom. Therefore, any commentary about family dynamics is worth additional exploration. Because it embodies all of the key components of the current iteration of the sitcom and its families, *Community* functions as the ideal concluding sitcom for analysis.

This chapter will first highlight *Community*’s postmodern core, then explore its meta-commentary on the sitcom before continuing with an interpretation of *Community*’s sitcom family. To conclude, the function of comfort in the sitcom will be examined in the context of *Community*, as its ability establish that environment of comfort is significant for the understanding of the sitcom today.

Community and Postmodernism

Community is a show intensely founded in postmodern ideas. In addition to questions of truth and morality—including in entire episode centered on a debate about whether man is inherently good or evil (“Debate 109”)—concepts of doubling and removal of the center are frequently brought up on the show. During the season two Christmas special, “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas,” the show overtly embraces its postmodern ideas. This particular episode opens with a standard shot of Greendale’s cafeteria, mimicking the beginning of countless previous episodes. However, this time the entire world and its characters have been transformed into Claymation—technically, silicone dolls with foam bodies over ball-and-socket armatures, as Abed observes. Abed is the only character that seems aware of these changes, and so naturally they begin to question his mental stability. Abed leads them on a trip to Planet Abed to discover the true meaning of Christmas.² Upon arriving at the planet’s North Pole, the group discovers that Abed’s mom has recently informed him that she will not be visiting for Christmas, as she has remarried and has a family of her own. This traumatic information forced Abed into a state of delusion to cope with the news. In order to save Abed, the group sings a song about the meaning of Christmas to remind him that they are there to support him. After returning from Planet Abed, the group agrees to remain in Claymation for the rest of the holidays to stay in the Christmas spirit.

² The audience’s perspective is that of Abed’s, meaning that while the rest of the main cast is confident that they are just sitting around the study room playing make believe, the visuals match the winter wonderland as Abed describes it, complete with a “Gumdrop Road,” “Carol Canyon,” and a “Eastern Candy Time” method of time. A further indication of this perspective is seen in how all the characters announce their actions as they are doing them, showing how they view the time as a shared group experience and not a literal trip to Planet Abed.

This episode exemplifies postmodernism in a number of ways. Firstly, its use of stop-motion animation immediately evokes classic Rankin-Bass produced TV Christmas specials like *Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) and *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town* (1970). By harkening back to this classic Christmas era, *Community* takes part in doubling—mimicking the past to inform and transform the present. For the show to establish its own type of Christmas atmosphere would simply not be as effective as leaning on previous influences, and so *Community* must visually quote a previous era to get its point across. To once again paraphrase Umberto Eco, *Community* embraces the Christmas spirit in an age of lost innocence. This doubling has consistently been a part of postmodern culture, as well as part of the entire run of *Community*. An episode in which Abed becomes power obsessed to win people's approval riffs on *GoodFellas* (1990) ("Contemporary American Poultry"); when Greendale bands together like a group of underdogs trying to defeat an oppressive force, it parallels George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) ("For a Few Paintballs More");³ and, when the Dean obsessively controls a local commercial because of his deep-seated insecurities, it references *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1991), the infamous documentary on the troubled production of *Apocalypse Now* ("Documentary Filmmaking: Redux"). While postmodernism has historically mined references to the past for the sake of nostalgia (J. Collins), *Community* pushes that tradition further and uses this method of doubling to cultivate development with its characters. Each reference emphasizes the growth and

³ This episode is the second of a two-part episode about a game of paintball on the campus. The first part is titled "A Fist Full of Paintballs" as an homage to the Sergio Leone western *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). So, while this second part continues the homage, this time from *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), the actual episode transitions into a homage to *Star Wars* as the plot demands it.

progression of the cast. With “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas,” the nostalgic Christmas setting is used to undercut Abed’s previous comprehension of Christmas and reaffirm his new understanding of it with his friends at Greendale. The amount of doubling that *Community* engages in, along with the depth of each reference, reinforces its place as a seminal postmodern sitcom.

Secondly, along with doubling, “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas” hinges its entire climax on the postmodern value of removing the center. Abed’s quest for the meaning of Christmas is deflated in the ending of the episode upon discovering the first season of *Lost* at the North Pole—“It’s a metaphor, it represents a lack of payoff.” Professor Duncan reminds Abed that Christmas is always a disappointment because “we put too much meaning into it, and it lets us down.” Abed’s friends come together to make explicit the theme of the episode, “the meaning of Christmas is the idea that Christmas has meaning.” While singing their Christmas song, they each proclaim what Christmas means to them, ranging from playing video games, to having good cheer. By choosing the Christian tradition of Christmas to deconstruct and remake arguably the most mainstream and dominant cultural phenomenon of the past several centuries, *Community* shows its postmodern values explicitly. The traditional dominant meaning of Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ (which Shirley does cite as her personal meaning of Christmas), but *Community* removes the center of Christmas and allows for a myriad of other ideas to take its place, even going so far to have Annie assert that “Christmas can even be a Hanukkah thing,” which is inherently paradoxical. By allowing the most basic and traditional holiday to be absent of its center, *Community* reminds the audience of the centrality of its postmodern values.

Throughout the run of the show, these postmodern ideas come back into discussion in a variety of forms, whether in furthering the discussion of religious harmony (“Comparative Religion”), the discussion of absolute truth and finding one’s personal truth (“Introduction to Finality”; “Repilot”), or contemplating ethics and whether man is good or evil (“Debate 109”). The constant dialogue about the removal of the center remains a crucial component in the show’s identity. As a result, *Community*, over the course of its six-season run, cements itself as a primary example of the new age of the postmodern sitcom.

A Sitcom about The Sitcom

From early on, *Community* makes it clear that it is interested in commenting on itself as a sitcom. This is most often achieved through Abed’s contribution to the show. Self-proclaimed as being “raised by movies,” Abed views and processes life through the lens of cinema and television. As a result, he consistently tries to structure his friends’ lives as if they are characters in a fictional narrative.⁴ His antics frequently allow the show to explore and deconstruct common cinematic and television tropes in an explicit and direct manner, whether that be in the form of elaborate parody⁵ or through dialogue

⁴ In “Basic Rocket Science,” he insists they pretend to walk in slow motion to increase drama; in “The Science of Illusion,” he manipulates Shirley and Annie to volunteer for security because he thinks it would make a good buddy cop movie; and, in “Critical Film Studies,” he tricks Jeff into an intimate conversation with him to mirror the plot of *My Dinner With Andre* (1981).

⁵ *The Shining* (1980), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Dead Poet Society* (1989), Ken Burns’s documentary *The Civil War* (1990), *GoodFellas*, and *Good Will Hunting* (1998) are just a small fraction of the entertainment that is covered in the show.

in character interactions (for example, in the season one finale, Abed tells Troy that he is trying to give the evening a “finale vibe”; “Pascal’s Triangle Revisited”).

Using Abed as an entry point, the series proceeds to tackle larger and less traditional ideas of cinema and television. As noted earlier, the topic most consistently discussed is the construct of the sitcom itself, both in content and form. While spending an entire episode in one room, Abed cautions them that they appear to be doing a “bottle episode,” allowing the entire episode to become a deconstruction of the common television trope, with Abed saying, “I hate bottle episodes. They’re wall to wall facial expressions and emotional nuance” (“Cooperative Calligraphy”). In “Paradigms of Human Memory,” the show does its own take on the classic clip episode, but with a twist. While clip episodes traditionally consist of recut scenes from previous episodes, all the clips used here are from moments never before seen on the show, undercutting the entire conceit of the show and commenting on the lazy and frugal tactic.⁶ They also struggle with the tension of creating a family from a group of friends, understanding that, while they call each other family, there is nothing to stop any of them from “looking at any of the others as sexual prospects” (“Romantic Expressionism”). Additionally, *Community* frequently subverts the classic will they/won’t they dynamic usually present in sitcoms (most notably in *Friends*, as discussed in Chapter three) first by revealing at the end of season two that Jeff and Britta had secretly been sleeping together for the better part of a year (“Paradigms of Human Memory”), and then by having the fan favorite Jeff and Annie couple ultimately not develop anywhere. On a larger scale, in the season five

⁶ While clip episodes are usually used to save money for the show by reusing old footage, this episode of *Community* actually created financial stress for season two of the show (Weir) .

premiere “Repilot,” they address the inherent entropy with characterization of sitcom characters. During a period of depression and stagnation for the group, Jeff tells the study group, “We went in one end as real people and out the other end as mixed-up cartoons.” While particularly relevant for the progression of the story, Jeff’s words also speak to the problem with all sitcom characters at some point. As was discussed in Chapter three, sitcom characters often become joke machines for whatever broad stroked stereotype is most popular for them. *Community* addresses this issue as a direct response to criticisms about its own characterization and the persistent issue in all sitcoms. All of these examples demonstrate the careful ways in which *Community* self-reflexively comments on sitcom form and content.

In terms of sitcom form, *Community* most clearly structures its progression as a type of purgatory. According to the Roman Catholic tradition, in tandem with the literature of Dante Alighieri, purgatory is a place after death where the dead go to “undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (Church). Throughout its run, *Community* makes direct connections to the idea of purgatory to drive the arc of the characters, even going so far as to have one of the characters say as a throwaway joke that Greendale is purgatory (“Curriculum Unavailable”). They must be refined in the sitcom flames in order to emerge as better people into “the joy of heaven.”

In each of the characters’ stories there is a desire and effort to improve as people. Jeff spends three seasons unlearning his lifestyle as an immoral lawyer and trying to become a better person. At the start of the show, Jeff enters community college to get a bachelor’s degree after getting disbarred for practicing law without a degree.

Unapologetic for his actions, Jeff sinisterly confides in a peer, saying, “I discovered at a very early age that if I talk long enough, I can make anything right or wrong. So, either I’m God or truth is relative. In either case, booyah” (“Pilot”). Three seasons later, in “Introduction to Finality,” after being refined by the flames through an extensive number of absurd trials and tasks while at Greendale, Jeff retracts those words in a dramatic speech:

Guys like me, we’ll tell you there’s no right or wrong. There’s no real truths. And as long as we all believe that, guys like me can never lose. Because the truth is I’m lying when I say there is no truth. The truth is, the pathetically, stupidly, inconveniently obvious truth is—helping only ourselves is bad and helping each other is good.⁷

His comments highlight his progression while living in the sitcom world and show him ready to begin leaving it behind in order to enter the next stage of his life.

However, the show continues on for another three seasons, and in doing so begins to address the next fundamental tension of the sitcom as a whole. Sitcoms are rarely structured around the need of character arcs, instead driven by the financial incentive ratings provide—and the desire to reach 100 episodes and achieve syndication.⁸

Therefore, a sitcom is likely to overstay its welcome in regard to what the characters need, often resulting in stagnation and repetition of the same character beats. Much like

⁷ While this initially seems to contradict many postmodern values, Jeff reaching this conclusion is one of several moments in the show where he finds “his own truth.” Several episodes before in “Pillows and Blankets,” he says, “I settled on *a truth* today that’s always going to be true. I would do anything for my friends” (emphasis mine). Read this way, Jeff is speaking more about his own personal truth in the above speech than anything broad truth, however universal that truth may actually be.

⁸ In the television industry, a sitcom must produce at least 100 episodes in order to reach syndication. This mean it can get airtime on networks to broadcast reruns. This largely ensures long-term financial success for the show, as it can still sell ad time and collect royalties every time it plays.

other aspects of the sitcom, *Community* addresses this issue candidly. By the beginning of season five, all of the Greendale Seven have graduated, but decide to return to the campus to operate a “Save Greendale Committee” to improve the school.⁹ In “Basic Story,” an insurance appraiser visits the school to determine its quality and value. Despite initial fear that this event will lead to the school’s closure, the inspection goes without issue. However, since the school is deemed valuable, the school board elects to sell the property into the private sector, resulting in the eventual termination of Greendale Community College. The irony of their plight emphasizes the irony of the sitcom. If a sitcom is about refining the characters and making them better and more complete, then the logic follows that, at a certain point, no more work needs to be done and the sitcom must conclude. Since Greendale stands in for the sitcom as an entity, all of the characters’ efforts of self-improvement and care to make the school and themselves better suggest that they all need to move on from Greendale to “the joy of heaven,” and both their time at Greendale and the sitcom itself should end. The show allows its characters to grapple with this and allows the discourse of the season five finale be about this paradoxical problem.¹⁰ The characters recognize that their time to be refined is ending, and they all deal with it in different ways. Jeff and Britta decide to get married to keep their time at Greendale, which started with Jeff trying to have sex with Britta, from being pointless.

⁹ This committee is also a metaphor for Dan Harmon trying to save *Community* from both the brink of cancelation and the divisive fourth season, which many found to be a false note with the tone of the show. This is yet another instance of *Community* being meta, this time about the culture of its desire to remain on air. (Hollywood Reporter; Entertainment Weekly)

¹⁰ There is even a quote from Dante in the episode, further confirming the influence of purgatorial themes on the show.

Abed and Annie search for a way to save the school in order to extend their process of refinement.

While the school is saved in the end and the show continues for another season, the tension of whether or not the show should still exist is explicitly highlighted. The series finale, “Emotional Consequences of Broadcast Television,”¹¹ turns into an extensive conversation about what another season of the show would look like, with the fundamental question of “Why would the characters still remain at Greendale?” squarely in the center of the discourse. Each character pitches his or her hypothetical version of another season, with possible reasons to keep everyone at Greendale and not moving into the next stage of their lives. At one point, Annie, after getting the opportunity to intern for the FBI, asks what the audience has been wondering the whole time. “How is [staying at Greendale] a good thing? Why doesn’t the audience feel bad for me?”

Sitcoms end and people move on, and the sitcom is constantly living in this tension between the desire to improve its characters and the desire to give them reasons to remain in purgatory. The show concludes with Abed and Annie leaving Greendale, leaving only Jeff and Britta from the original Greendale Seven still on campus, albeit refined and changed for the better. Each of them is entering a new stage of life, the sitcom ends, and they get to experience the joy of heaven as a result.

The Community of Community

The constructed family of *Community* is one of the most explicitly developed families in sitcoms. From the very first episode these familial values are cultivated. The

¹¹ This title is particularly ironic because the finale aired on the streaming service “Yahoo! Screen” instead of broadcast television, as the title would suggest.

show commences with Jeff Winger trying to seduce Britta in their Spanish 101 class. He pretends to be a Spanish tutor in order to trick her into spending one-on-one time with him. However, through a variety of unforeseen circumstances, all seven of the main characters end up at the one-on-one tutoring session. Jeff succeeds in getting them all to turn on each other and start bickering, and then convinces Britta to agree to a date if he can stop their fighting. Here Jeff delivers one of his soon-to-be signature speeches to remedy the group. He concludes by saying,

Look at the person sitting next to you. I want you to extend to that person the same compassion that you extend for sharks, pencils, and Ben Affleck. I want you to say to that person “I forgive you”... You’ve just stopped being a study group. You’ve now become something unstoppable. I hereby pronounce you a community. (“Pilot”)

By proclaiming the title of the show, Jeff sets its progression in motion. The group makes up and then kicks Jeff out for his deception, only to later include him out of sympathy. For the next six seasons, the study group works to fulfill Jeff’s decree to become a community.

With the study table doubling as the dining room table, the group bonds through their shared experiences. Their story is about becoming vulnerable and accepting the care of those around them while also learning how to care for others, as well.¹² While Jeff is the character on which the story primarily focuses, each member of the study group deals with becoming vulnerable in some facet. The changes begin in small ways—Jeff forfeiting a good grade on a Spanish project to support Piece (“Spanish 101”), Troy

¹² This is mirrored in the classes they take each season. Spanish 101: Learning how to communicate with each other. Anthropology 101: Understanding the process of becoming a tight knit tribe. Biology 101: Evolving and adapting to changes together. History 101: Processing how they have grown as a family in the past and preparing for the future.

learning how to respect Abed and his eccentricities (“Advanced Criminal Law”)—but they are truly put to the test in the 10th episode of the first season, “Environmental Science.” In this episode, three plot threads run simultaneously: Troy and Abed search for their missing lab rat, Fifel; Pierce helps Shirley prepare for a speech for class; and Jeff exploits Spanish teacher Señor Chang (Ken Jeong) when his wife leaves him, causing the rest of the group’s Spanish grades to suffer. By the end of the episode’s second act, Troy refuses to help Abed look for Fifel due to his musophobia and general selfishness (“Real friends help *me* with things. Not vice versa”), Shirley rejects Pierce’s advice for her speech, and Jeff has been kicked out of the study group for his behavior. The climax resolves each of these plot threads over the tune of “Somewhere Out There,” where Troy faces his fears to help catch Fifel, Shirley finally listens to Pierce and succeeds on her speech, and Jeff reconciles Chang with his wife to alleviate the group’s workload. The episode concludes with everyone having made up and Jeff announcing to the group, “I thought hanging out with you guys was the worst way to pass Spanish. I was wrong.” Jeff takes strides to repair his relationship with the group despite the benefits he received doing otherwise, and the rest of the group slowly begins to act selflessly on behalf of one another.

The following school year, the group is further called upon to be vulnerable. While they have each begun to accept each other more, Jeff still remains resistant to fully committing to the group. After getting in a fight that begins with Jeff refusing to help run an intervention to get Pierce off of his pain pill addiction—Jeff asks them, “How much stuff do we have to go through before my commitment to this group stops being questioned?” to which Annie responds, “Maybe that’s what friendship is, going through

lots of stuff together” (“Early 21st Century Romanticism”)—the conversation spirals down into the contested legitimacy of the band “The Barenaked Ladies.”¹³ This results in Jeff storming out of the study room and refusing to attend the Valentine’s Day dance with them. After a frustrating night by himself without any member of the group reaching out to him, Jeff confesses in a text how he is afraid to commit to the study group:

It might not shock you guys to hear the real reason we had a fight today. It wasn’t about The Barenaked Ladies. Although I do have some unsolved issues there. Caring about a person can be scary. Caring about six people can be a horrifying, embarrassing nightmare. At least for me. But if I can’t say it today, when can I say it? I love you guys.

Jeff’s admission of love here marks another key moment of vulnerability with the group that brings them closer together as a family.

When Abed and Troy move into an apartment together in the third season’s “Remedial Chaos Theory,” the show takes the opportunity to evaluate the group dynamics and how they work together as a constructed family. The roommates throw a house-warming party and invite the entire study group to their home. When the pizza they ordered arrives, in order to determine who will go downstairs to retrieve it, Jeff devises a system where “starting on my left with one, your number comes up, you go.” Abed warns him that by doing so he is creating six different timelines. The episode is then divided into individual segments for each possible number roll. Therefore, the episode allows for the exploration of group dynamics when one of the members of the group is absent. We learn a great deal about each of the characters from the interactions that takes place over the course of the episode, with characters both at each other’s

¹³ Or BNL as they refer to them, because “we need a shorthand for them, that’s how fundamental they are” (“Early 21st Century Romantic Expressionism”).

throats and embracing affectionately, depending on the timeline.¹⁴ However, in its closing moments, the episode allows for a reflection on their roles within the constructed family. After all six timelines have been played out, Jeff roles the die again, but this time Abed catches the die before the number is shown. He cautions against letting randomness dictate their lives:

The universe is an endless raging sea of randomness. Our job isn't to fight it, but to weather it together, on the raft of life. A raft held together by those few, rare, beautiful things that we know to be predictable ... us. It won't matter what happens to us as long as we stay honest and accepting of each other's flaws and virtues.

In context of the chaos the audience has just witnessed in each of the other timelines, these words take on a new layer of resonance. The members of the group fight and argue, but still are extremely important to each other. This episode allows them to act out dozens of iterations of dysfunctional family dynamics throughout the various timelines. In doing so, *Community* underscores the complexity of the familial bonds within the strange, constructed family the study group has become.

The remainder of the third season is also where the group experiences the most change. The events of the school year are by far the most cartoonish and sensational, as the Greendale Seven get temporarily expelled after former Spanish teacher Ben Chang takes over the school as an insane and evil dictator. There are critical moments where the group bands together and grows closer, even as life pulls them further apart. Best friends Abed and Troy are pitted against each other and get in a campus-wide pillow fight before they can reconcile ("Pillows and Blankets"); Troy and Britta begin sharing a romantic

¹⁴ The episode also includes an elaborate scenario involving gunfire that results in Pierce dying, Shirley becoming an alcoholic, and Annie being admitted into an insane asylum.

bond together; Abed fears being left behind by Troy (“Virtual System Analysis”); and, most importantly, when the group gets expelled from Greendale, they must stick together despite no longer having a class to take as a group (“Course Listing Unavailable”). While they all sit around a table grappling with the difficult changes in their life, Abed effectively assuages the group’s fears, reminding them that “things are bad, but we’re together” (“Course Listing Unavailable”). Despite having grown together as a study group, the fears of the unknown and of change still permeate the group.

However, the show continually returns to the idea of sticking together as a family to endure times of trial, which calls back to Abed’s observations in “Remedial Chaos Theory.” They are in a stage of chaos now much more substantial than a question of who should get the pizza. Abed reminding them that things will be okay because they are together echoes his belief from earlier that they will always be able to fight the chaos in their lives together if they “stay honest and accepting of each other’s flaws and virtues.” In the face of tragedy and despair, the narrative of *Community* is to rely on the strength of the constructed family they have created. The closing moments in “Course Listing Unavailable” show that in action, as they share a meal together while facing an uncertain future, content to just be with each other as a family, trusting that things will soon be okay.¹⁵

Later on, in season four, Jeff tracks down his runaway father and agrees to spend Thanksgiving with him. A common theme in many constructed family sitcoms is the lack

¹⁵ The visual staging of the scene adds even more layers to this theme. Right before Abed gives his speech, there are several nods to various other timelines from “Remedial Chaos Theory”—Shirley appearing to pour herself a drink, Britta meeting a pizza deliveryman she married in another timeline. However, as Abed’s speech brings them together each of setups are subverted to remind the audience that their bond as a group prevents them from being in “the darkest timeline.”

of connection with biological families (Michael Scott's poor relationship with his stepfather in *The Office*, Monica's desire to win the approval of her parents on *Friends*, Jake's turbulent relationship with his estranged father). Annie's parents refused to talk to her after her pill addiction, Troy's parents are nonexistent, Britta's parents were drug addicts, and even Pierce's father resents him, verbally calling him the "worst son ever" at one point ("Digital Estate Planning"). During the episode "Cooperative Escapism in Familial Relations," *Community* confronts this common theme head on. Despite his being extremely nervous, Jeff's initial interaction with his father goes well. However, as the evening wears on, tensions begin to mount and Jeff confronts his father on his failures and leaves him alone. As a direct reaction to these events, the next day at school Jeff prepares another Thanksgiving feast for the group in the study room—allowing the study table to double as a family dining room table again. Jeff spent four seasons running away from his father and learning to embrace his constructed family, and then after finally meeting his biological father, he solidifies his decision to dedicate himself to the study group family, telling them, "I thought we could take some time and be grateful for our real family, the one we chose." This quote is perhaps the most explicit *Community* ever gets in articulating the value of the constructed family. Not only has the show worked to develop the main cast as a family, but this episode allows the characters to actively choose their constructed family over their biological ones, furthering the intentionality of their bond.

The final seasons allow for the culmination of all the constructed family themes. By this point in the show, several of the cast members left the series for a variety of personal reasons. Because of this, the group is forced to become even more tightly

connected and closer as the number of the original Greendale Seven dwindles.¹⁶ In season five's "Geothermal Escapism," the study group must prepare to bid farewell to Troy as he departs on a trip to sail around the world. While the episode descends into an elaborate game of denial for Troy's departure in the form of a campus-wide game of "The Floor is Lava,"¹⁷ it never loses sight of the fact the one of the crucial members of the group is leaving. Although Abed draws the game out to keep Troy from leaving, he ultimately must come to grips with Troy's exit from Greendale, as must the rest of the study group. As Troy packs up to leave, they each share a heart to heart with him, all of their goodbyes echoing that of a family member leaving. Jeff and Troy have an exchange that mimics that of a father and son, with Troy even telling Jeff, "I hope I make you proud." As study group watches Troy drives away, there is no confusion about the relationships among the characters. They are not watching a friend leave, but rather a member of their family.

Throughout the run of the series, the theme of evolution reoccurs—most notably in season three when they all take Biology 101 together—as they must learn to grow and adapt as they grow closer together. Jeff acknowledges this in the season three premiere when he admits that he is not prepared to move on from the group and take a class without them ("Biology 101"). He realizes that, one day, they will evolve and become their own people away from Greendale, and that moment terrifies him. The rest of the season follows Jeff's fears by developing each of the group's individual lives in smaller

¹⁶ Chevy Chase leaving the show resulted in his character Pierce dying. In "Cooperative Polygraphy," he bequeaths something to each member of the study group in a manner that mirrors a family reading a will.

¹⁷ In case the title of the game is not abundantly clear, "The Floor is Lava" is a game where participants must climb on furniture and are not allowed to step on the floor. The winner is the last one who has not fallen into the "lava."

pockets of interests. The season three finale involves Jeff repeatedly trying to study for his biology exam and getting stuck on the term “cellular mitosis,” which is “the process by which cells split off from each other and replicate, so that all of your skin cells are recognizably skin cells and all of your bone cells are bone cells” (VanDerWerff). The members of the study group begin the process of growing and expanding on their own, much like the division of cells. Jeff’s eventually comprehension of the term pairs with his gradual process of accepting the change he feared earlier.

In the finale, that evolution comes to fruition. While a bulk of the finale is dedicated to the legitimacy of the show’s continued existence, it still reflects on the existence of the constructed family. However, since the show started with Jeff as the most resistant to forming a family, the reflection in the finale is largely from his perspective. This episode, “Emotional Consequences of Broadcast Television,” sees nearly all of the members of the study group leave Greendale and move on to something better. Since season three, Jeff has been grappling with the evolution of the group, and in the final season he struggles to come to grips with the fact that he may be the final person to remain at Greendale. The core of the finale is dedicated to Jeff working through those issues and finally accepting the evolution of the group out of Greendale. This acceptance is what ushers in the final words on the constructed family. First, before leaving Greendale, the group congregates in the study room and Jeff opens his heart to the group one last time, telling them, “I love that I got to be with you guys. You saved my life and changed it forever,” before initiating a group hug. These closing words cement the importance the group has to Jeff, who before was selfish and egotistic. Without a biological family to love and be loved by, his community at Greendale filled that role and

“saved his life.” Additionally, when Jeff drives Annie and Abed to the airport to send them off, he shares a final embrace with Abed. When the hug ends, Jeff refuses to let go of Abed and hugs him more tightly. Considering that Abed was the person responsible for bringing the study group together back in the first episode of the series, Jeff’s desire to hold on to Abed—both literally and figuratively—emphasizes the immense gratitude he feels toward him and the family he helped create. While the members of the family are all in different places by the end of the series, the closing moments of the series finale reinforces the absolute significance of the familial bonds they formed over the course of six seasons.

Conclusion

Whether implicit or explicit, nearly every detail of *Community* works to pay homage to or parody the form and content of the sitcom. The understanding of *Community* as a meta sitcom is crucial—a fact cannot be stressed enough. Because *Community* is a self-reflexive sitcom about the sitcom as a whole, its inclusion of a constructed family is essential to its importance. *Community*’s continued reinforcement of the significance of the constructed family highlights not only its importance to the makeup of the show itself, but also its importance to the sitcom as a whole. Today’s sitcoms are populated with constructed families, and by asserting itself as a sitcom about sitcoms, *Community* argues that the constructed family is part of the essence of the sitcom today.

Lastly, since *Community* is about the sitcom, even with all of its components of postmodernism and constructed family, it still serves little purpose for discussion here if

it does not elicit a feeling of comfort, which is the ultimate point of sitcoms throughout history. Measuring comfort is admittedly difficult and subjective, but there are still key traits that make explicit an environment of comfort in *Community*. *Community* became popular because of its quirky meta-humor and its clever pop culture references, but it endured in the face of cancelation largely because of the family. While any number of the examples described above could further the argument of comfort, Annie articulates the closest thing to a thesis statement of the sitcom as an entity while comforting Abed in season three: “You’re afraid you don’t fit in. You’re afraid you’ll be alone. Great news: you share that with all of us, so you’ll never be alone and you’ll always fit in” (“Virtual System Analysis”). This is the true idea of *Community*; its comfort derives from the idea that, for anyone, there is always a place to fit in. The comfort *Community* provides is what sustains interest in the show, this idea that we can be something unstoppable and that, despite our brokenness and flaws, our doubts and insecurities, our troubled and turbulent past, no matter where we are or who we are with, we can be known, cared for, and loved.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

When I was a kid, I used to watch you on TV. For half an hour a week, I got to watch this show about four people who had nobody, who came together and became a family. And for half an hour every week, I had a home.

- Diane, *BoJack Horseman*

When evaluating something as expansive as the sitcom, it is impossible to be completely exhaustive. The whole point of the postmodern turn in the progression of the sitcom is the removal of a center, a dominant force that dictates any particular style. Therefore while the sitcoms listed above speak toward some of the most compelling arguments about the sitcom family, they are not the comprehensive limits of this idea. Similar arguments can be made for *How I Met Your Mother*, which is structured and developed in a manner similar to *Friends*. Or *New Girl* (2012), which returns to the domestic sphere with a group of friends all living under the same roof and becoming a family together. Despite its name, *The Last Man on Earth* (2015) focuses on the surviving members of human race after a virus wipes out civilization, needing to band together as a family in order to survive. *The Big Bang Theory*, *Silicon Valley* (2014), *BoJack Horseman* (2014), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015), *Master of None* (2016), *Insecure* (2016), *The Good Place*, the list of sitcoms that follow the format of the constructed family to tell their stories is only continuing to grow. In many ways, this work could consist of dozens of chapters dissecting the myriad of constructed families in sitcoms today and how they cultivate a sense of comfort. The ones selected for analysis

may be the most indicative of this cultural shift, but they are in no way the only sitcoms that adhere strongly to this idea.

There may be an issue, however, in analyzing a series of sitcoms that have mostly all concluded. As evident by the extensive analysis in chapter two, the sitcom is quickly changing and what was once popular and in vogue can easily fall out of style. However, at this current junction it is impossible to determine how long the constructed family will remain the focus in the sitcom. Therefore just to assume that a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon is not worthwhile because of the possibility that it may be eclipse is unwarranted. Further, as far as my personal research and investigation has yielded, the apparent driving force in sitcoms today has had very little literature to claim to its name. Understanding the trend on the constructed family in sitcoms and society as a whole merits further discussion and greater analysis. Much like the pioneering work of the sitcoms discussed in this text, my work here should not be viewed as the end of the conversation, but the beginning of the discussion.

Looking outward from here, there are few definitive conclusions that can be made about the future of the sitcom. The form is naturally going to evolve further. History suggests that a return to the domestic sphere is likely to happen at some point. While it will not resemble those domestic sitcoms of the '50s and '80s, reclamation of the household space seems inevitable. What will likely determine the framework of these household sitcoms is whatever follows the popularity of postmodernism. While postmodernism has been in the forefront of the cultural mind, the proceeding ideology is most strongly in control of what the sitcom becomes next, much like postmodern helped form the present day sitcom. What we value in society will continue to shape what the

sitcom becomes, as it has proven to be a sort of cultural map for what we deem important and valuable.

However, wherever the sitcom evolves, history strongly suggests that it will continue operating to achieve a common goal of comfort. The earlier sitcoms of *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* worked to establish that comfort in the traditional family structure, and the sitcoms of this era discussed here further that again. *Friends* reminded the audience that no matter how hard the troubles of adult life became, that the friends in their life would always be there for them. *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* reinforced that even in the banality of the workplace, there are people to support them and care for them. Lastly, *Community* encapsulated both of those ideas and pushed them further, illustrating that no one is beyond the love and care of a group of friends. While it is difficult to empirically prove that there is a direct correlation between the popularity of a show and the reasons for viewership, considering how substantial these ideas were to the very makeup of the show, it would be inattentive to not draw some type of conclusion from that available information.

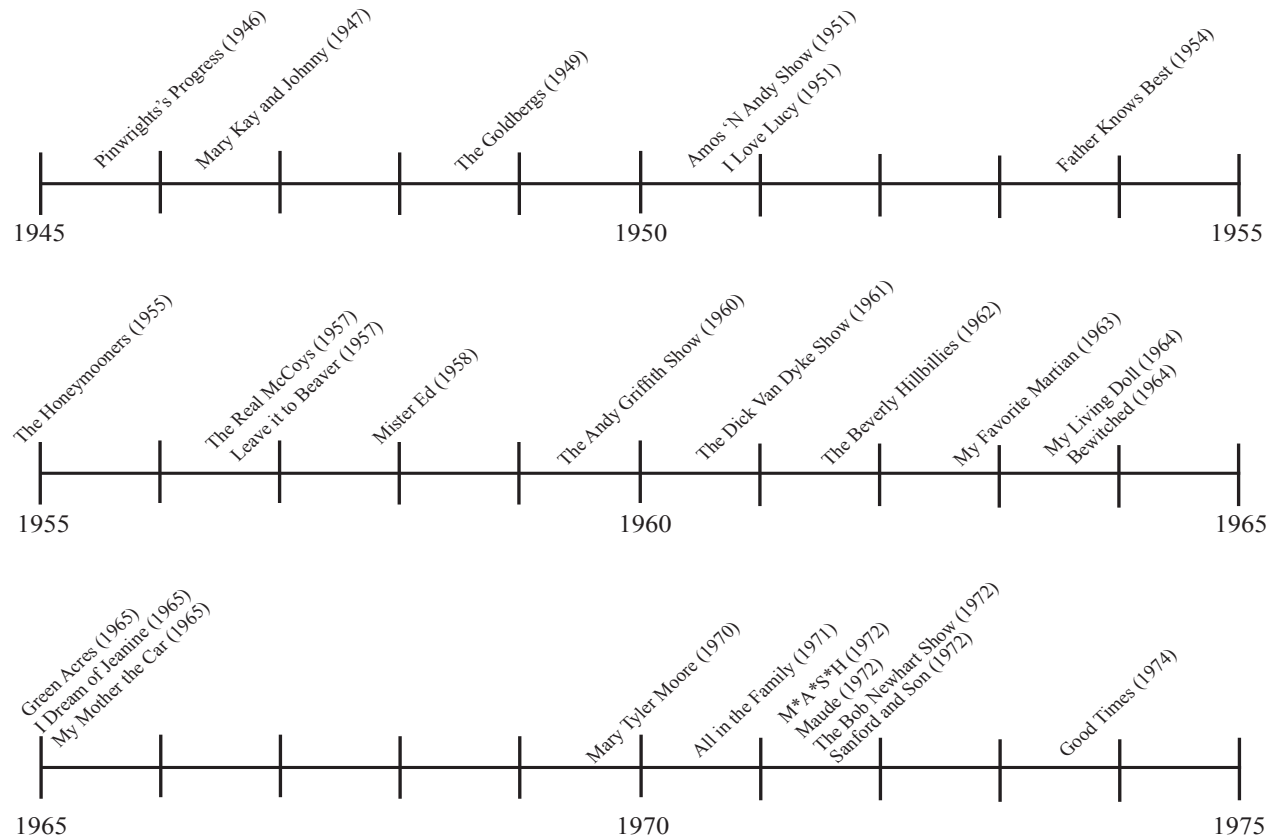
Those ideas are inherent to concepts of comfort. In a world where the traditional family is in many ways becoming obsolete as a dominant way of life--another instance of the removal of the center--it follows that, much like with the beginning of the sitcoms back in the 1950s, people would turn to the sitcom for reassurance of stability. Many people today come from broken families, blended families, or never knew their birth parents. There is an innate sense of comfort that comes from being reassured that even if one was not blessed with the idyllic family where they belong; they can still construct one on their own with the people they care about in their life. This may speak towards the

significance of the sitcom and its endurance. One of the most universal desires among humans is to love and be loved. The constructed family sitcom allows for a vicarious outlet for that desire to be filled. This is shown in Michael Scott gaining the affection of an office that previously despised him, in Jeff Winger understanding that his dad abandoning him does not mean no one will ever love him again, as well as countless more examples throughout a myriad of other sitcoms. These stories provide hope to the viewers and suggest that no matter how lonely they feel, the ability to connect with people is still possible and worth pursuing.

APPENDIX

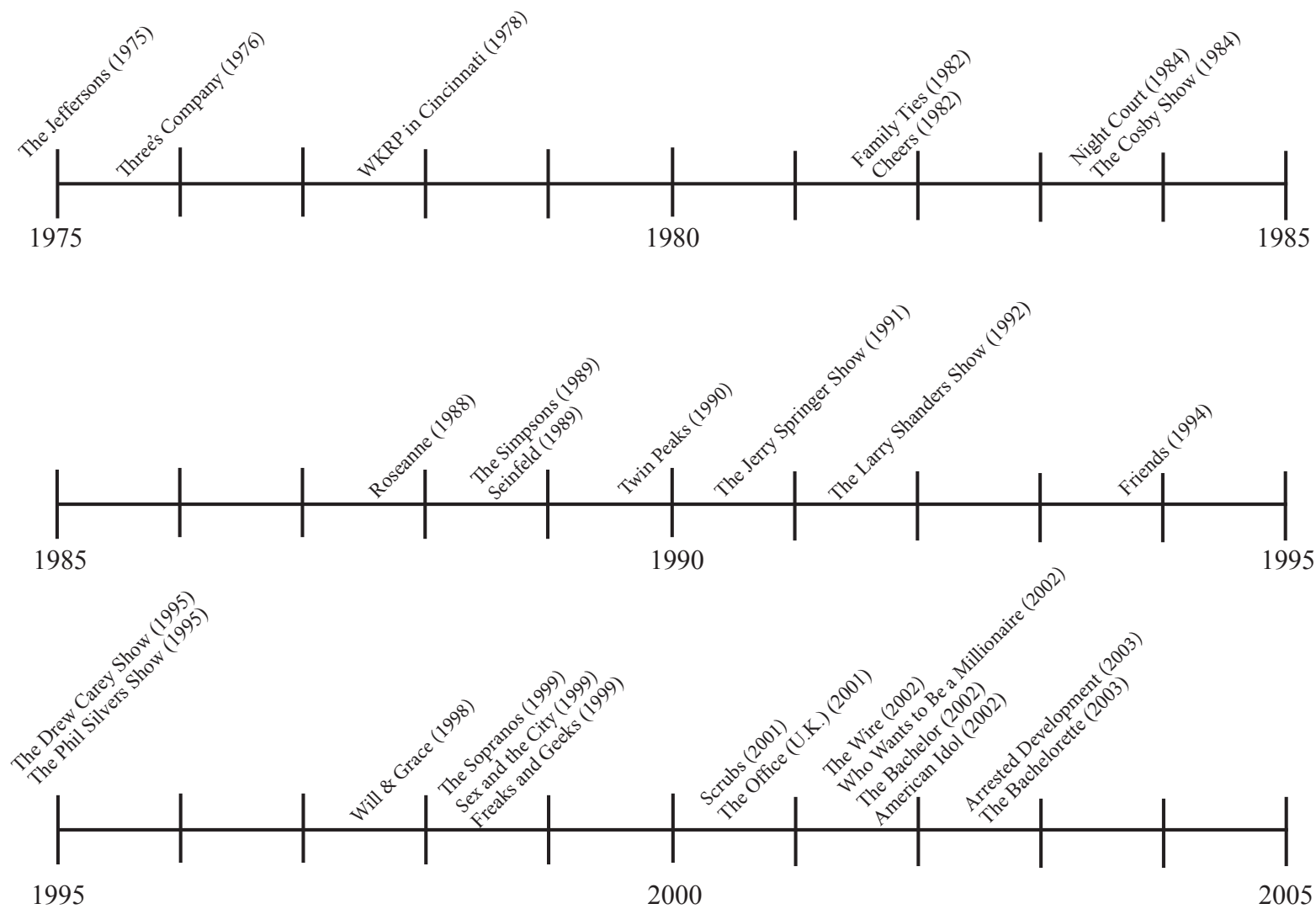
APPENDIX A

Timeline of Sitcoms

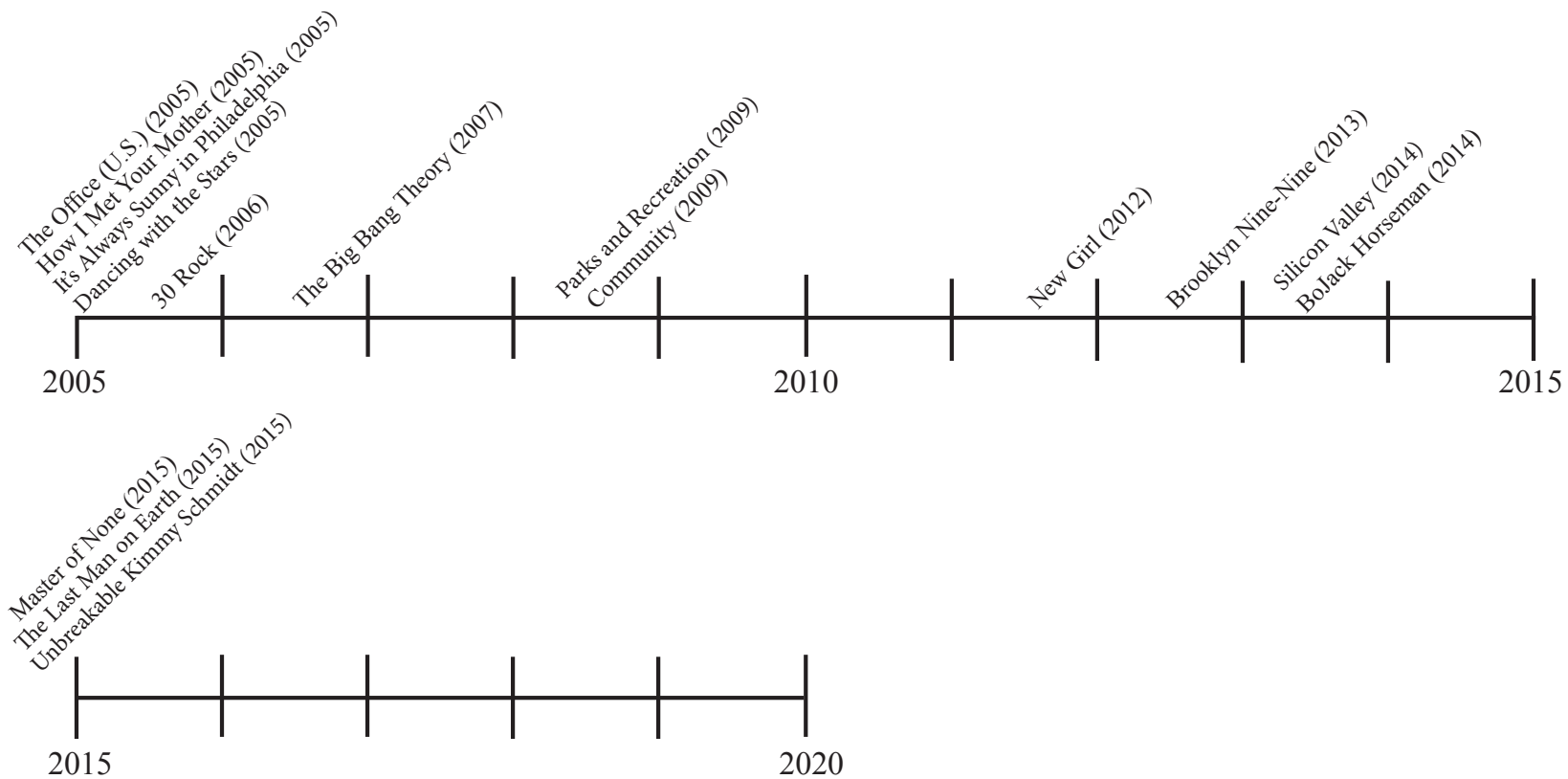


(1945-1975)

Figure 1



(1975-2005)
Figure 2



(2005-2015)
Figure 3

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