Peter, Katherine: From Dapper to Dopey: How Class Shapes TV Dads

In looking at cultural perceptions and values, television of a certain era can provide a glimpse into the public opinion of a given time (you could simplify this sentence to "Television provides a glimpse into cultural perceptions and values"). With this in mind, I sought to examine how depictions of TV fathers, specifically in situational comedies, are reflective of American cultural perceptions of masculinity.

As American culture changes with time, so does the content of television programming. The advent of TV coincided with the rise of suburbs, and the earliest sitcoms depicted ethereal (odd word choice... do you mean "idealized"?), while, upper middle class suburban life. The counterculture of the 60s and 70s 1 960s and 1970s moved away from family programming, but the conservatism of the Reagan era brought it back. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, sitcoms reflected a changing cultural landscape of increased representation and a subversion of the ideas of the nuclear family. Moreover, the rise of cable TV at the end of the century allowed for more narrowcasting of programming. Shows were now made for the parents, or for the children, but rarely both. Now, networks "tweak the basic formula of the family sitcom by casting young adolescents as their stars while maintaining siblings and parents in subsidiary roles" (Pugh, 2018:137)

In researching the different types of fathers that are depicted on tv, I found that much of the differences have to do with class. Middle class, suburban families were very prevalent in the early days of television. With this came the trope of the "Middle Class Superdad," a term coined by Richard Butsch (Butsch, 1992). The lives of these fathers are perfectly balanced, and "middle class men competently fulfill their manly roles" (Butsch, 1992 direct quote require page numbers in this style). Middle class fathers on television have an abundance of wisdom to impart, and are devoted to their work, their wives, and their children. They are applauded for being able to relate to their children, and often have a progressive involvement in child rearing, while also maintaining their role as the boss of the house. The ideal of the middle class sitcom father "symbolizes the privileges of an adult masculinity that...also trips over this inherent contradiction in patriarchal authority." (Pugh, 2018:38)

Conversely, working class fathers must compensate for their inability to run a household with gruffness, and masculine physical traits. The stereotypical working class fathers are immature, and prone to emotional outbursts. In many cases, they are not in control of their own house, and are portrayed as dumb, especially in relation to their wives and children. Steven Gelber suggests that increased home ownership and the rise of suburbanization linked the ability to maintain a home to masculinity. With this, manual labor and "fix-it" fathers became a masculine ideal. Furthermore, home improvement "soothed the troubled minds of men when they returned from the city by providing them with a masculine alternative to effete office work" (Gelber, 1997:75). This is then where working class fathers derived their masculinity. This is especially important as the working class men were seen as demasculinized by tv standards that most often depicted wealthy fathers. As Butsch suggests, in a "fictional world in which success is so pervasive...the failing working-class men are thereby labeled deviants who are responsible for their own failure." (Butsch, 1992)

In addition to the distinction between working class and middle class fathers, there is the extremely prevalent category of single fathers. Single fathers are extremely over-represented on television, and are "in direct contradiction to the reality of single parent households" (Press, 2009; page number). They are seen as subversions of the nuclear family, though still fit into the categories most often presented by the Middle Class Superdad. They are able to provide for their families, and display masculine characteristics even when they also have to play the role of mother.

All in all, these different depictions of fathers reflect perceptions of masculinity based on class. Wealthy fathers are seen as all-knowing. They give out advice, and they learn important lessons along with their kids. Working class fathers have to compensate in their masculinity and are often gruff and grumpy. They usually have a hard edge and are at war with the family dynamic. The values of masculinity change over time, and each generation of sitcom families is a response to the last. TV dads represent masculine ideals, while also pushing boundaries of what it means to be a father. Well-written overview of a good study. Strong list of sources.

References

Bettie, Julie

1995 Class Dismissed? Roseanne and the Changing Face of Working-Class. Social Text 45:125-149

Brook, Vincent


Butsch, Richard


Cantor, Murial G.

Edley, Nigel  

Ellis, John  

Franklin, Jeff.  
1987 Our Very First Show.  *Full House*, season 1, episode 1.

Frazer, June M., Frazer, Timothy C  

Gelber, Steven M  

Goldberg, Gary  

Kramer, Felix  

Press, Andrea  

Pugh, Tison  

Pugh, Tison  

Pugh, Tison  

Pugh, Tison


Schwartz, Sherwood