

COURSE:

Gender Communication

INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. Barbra Hugenberg

COURSE COMPLETED:

Fall 2009

ASSIGNMENT TITLE:

Gender Research Paper

ASSIGNMENT PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

This paper was designed for students to research a specific gender-related topic. We were instructed to take a gender-related topic and find either a television show or a movie from a past decade and the present and relate it to our chosen gender topic.

REFLECTIONS:

Dr. Hugenberg gave us very specific guidelines for this paper, which really allowed me to excel when it came down to the writing process. I really appreciate it when professors take the time to lay out their requirements for papers and assignments, as well as guide students through the writing process with questions that should be answered and tips for what we should be looking for when observing our chosen media artifacts. Before this paper was even explained, I had always had a certain theory when it came to the way fathers are portrayed in current sitcoms. I called it the “dummy-dad syndrome,” and I related it to the social penetration theory. My paper highlighted a specific sitcom and how the show portrayed the father in a moronic, child-like way, which I found to be a common theme in today’s scripted television. I believe this assignment was the first time I really saw a practical, every-day life application for the various communication theories. I thought it was really cool that I could study a theory that I had conceptualized and relate it to communications in an academic way through this assigned paper.

Running Head: Social Exchange Theory

The Fatherly Family Role: Social Exchange Theory

Renee A. Elliott

Kent State University

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There seems to be a vast array of family dynamics that are represented on television. The term “modern family” has grown to be such a vague statement that the term “family” is now left up to your own interpretation. We have all heard that no two families are alike, but it is possible that families can share the same characteristics. These characteristics are demonstrated on television through trends. I will be examining two different eras of television sitcoms: one era being the 1970s and the other being modern-day television. Both of these eras set up television that portrays two different family dynamics. My paper will focus on the role of the father on these popular sitcoms. In addition to detailing the role of the father in their TV families, I will also be relating their behavior and family dynamics to the Social Exchange Theory. This theory will provide specific details and research that focuses on husbands and their relationship with their wives while being responsible for their family. The dynamics of these two TV families have their similarities; however, it is the differences between these TV dads’ behaviors that intrigue me to take a closer look and apply this fitting communication theory.

The social exchange theory, according to Changing Minds (n.d.), can be explained by an individual’s perception of their relationship and their specific involvement with their partner. This can be done by looking at the balance of a romantic relationship, the give and the take, the type of relationship that the individual feels that he/she should be involved in, and if they believe they could find more happiness and compatibility in a different romantic relationship. The social exchange theory is mainly concerned with a comparison level. The individual needs to recognize his/her involvement in the relationship compared to what he/she is receiving from the relationship. If this comparison is off-balance, then the individual in the relationship may begin

to feel less compatible with their partner. Another way of comparing relationships can be explained by Koper and Jaasma (2001), by using a cost and rewards system. These theorists noted that individuals, “perceive, evaluate, and describe others in terms of the costs and rewards attendant to interaction with them, social exchange theories provide a coherent explanatory mechanism for social orientation” (p.58). As people in relationships are constantly comparing and contrasting their partners and their commitment to their relationship, it is no surprise that the entertainment on television would reflect such a common practice. Social exchange theory is a practice that is on repeat in everyday lives. Individuals do not examine their relationship to determine whether or not the person they are with is giving as much as they are receiving. It is a constant, ongoing evaluation that people use as support to either dissolve the relationship or keep it going. This theory is easily portrayed, and can be seen on television shows daily. However, by comparing past and present television shows, it seems that the individual who is evaluating his/her relationship has shifted from the husband’s responsibility to the wife’s.

The two television shows that I chose to highlight were shows that consisted of my definition of family in comparison to my own. My definition of family, and a majority of others’, consists of a husband and wife team raising their children in one household. Two TV artifacts that demonstrate this idea of family is *The Brady Bunch* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Both of these sitcoms were on television for years and had huge success. One of the reasons I feel that they encountered such success was because of their portrayal of family and how it closely modeled real families of their specific times. In the episode I chose to highlight titled, “Sorry Right Number” from *The Brady Bunch*, Mike (the father) has had issues keeping his bunch from taking advantage of the telephone. Seeing that there were six children in the family,

plus a wife, one phone line just was not enough for their gossiping and childish rants and his important business calls concerning golf games with office colleagues. Mike made the decision without consulting his wife Carol that he was going to add an additional phone line in his office for his use only. As Mike stated, he is the “master of my fate and the captain of my phone.” Not even his wife was permitted to use his telephone because her gossip got in the way of his business. After the double phone bill got out of control because of the children’s blatant disregard for Mike’s rules of not using his phone in his den, Mike decided to make another decision without the consent of his wife. He gave clear instructions for the housekeeper, Alice, to not allow any of the children or Carol to unveil his surprise until he arrived home from the office. His master solution was a pay telephone set up in the living room. He fairly raised all of his children’s allowances to help pay for their calls and immediately shut down the children’s wishes to discuss other solutions. However, when Mike was forced to use the pay phone for an important business call, after his wife was on his private line gossiping, the call went south when he ran out of change and the call was disconnected. Of course everything worked out for Mike in the end and he was rewarded at work for his brilliant idea and Carol was left to be criticized again for the illegal use of his telephone, just as the children previously were.

This portrayal of the 1970s family showed that the father was the master of his home. The wife was regarded as another child that needed to be reminded of the father’s dominance. Mike’s comparison in relation to the social exchange theory would have shown that he feels he is giving more than his wife is giving to their marriage and that all the responsibility has fallen on his shoulders to keep the household running in a masculine, efficient manner. It appears now in modern sitcoms that the dominance role in the family has shifted from the father to the mother.

In my review of the *Everybody Loves Raymond* episode titled “Call me Mom,” I believe it highlights what I have concluded to be the dummy-dad syndrome.

In this episode we are introduced to Raymond’s mother-in-law, who insists that he call her Mom. When Raymond’s mother Marie finds out, she is upset and reprimands Raymond for using the term Mom so lightly. Raymond’s wife Deborah witnesses what Marie has just told her son and immediately became defensive. Deborah stood over Raymond who was sitting on the couch and began challenging her authority in a combative manner while Raymond is trying to make jokes and tries to win her over with witty remarks. After being disgusted with Raymond’s lack of attention to how she feels about his mother and her feelings, she hits Raymond with a pillow and storms out of the room. He goes after her while stumbling over his words because he does not know how to communicate with Deborah or fix the situation. Raymond comes up with an off-the-cuff idea for Deborah to call Marie Mom. This ends up blowing up in his face because Marie rejects Deborah calling her Mom, and now Deborah is even more upset than she initially was. She, again, reprimands Raymond, and they finally mutually decide to no longer call their mother-in-laws Mom ever again.

I chose this particular episode because I felt that it really highlighted the dummy-dad syndrome that I previously stated. I came up with this term after watching countless sitcoms where the father-figure lacks all appropriate traits. What these men have in common include: not being responsible parents or partners, immaturity, disregard for anyone’s emotions beside their own, unable to make logical decisions, and are completely dependent on their partners. In some ways these modern-day TV dads behave like another child in the family for the wife/mother to care for rather than a loving husband who shares all the family and martial responsibilities equally with their wife. I was really able to see this example in Raymond. After fumbling over

his words and trying to make jokes to fix a situation he was having with his wife Deborah, he appeared to be a helpless child in their relationship rather than a compatible partner in life. As I mentioned above, both of these sitcoms have similarities and differences, and some of those differences are what made the shows so popular during their times.

These media artifacts challenge us to look at how marriage is being portrayed in entertainment television. The ideologies of the 1970s seem to have completely shifted to what we have to watch today. *The Brady Bunch* supported the men leading the household, while the wife was shown following all of the husband's wishes and orders with delight. However, in *Everybody Loves Raymond*, it seems that Deborah holds a majority of the dominance in the marriage and household, while Raymond behaves like a child, unequipped to handle any serious conversation or event. Both of these sitcoms showed a major lack of balance, which happens to be the main concern in the social exchange theory. According to Sally Planalp, "Social exchange theorists recognize, of course, that feelings are related to rewards in some way--either resulting from them, serving as a stand-in for them, or perhaps even being defined in terms of them (if it feels good, it's a reward; if it feels bad, it's a cost)." In light of Planalp's findings, it is hard to imagine that either of these TV marriages could be portrayed as happy and fulfilled. Both shows depict marital relationships that have one person in control while the other person is submissive to that control. There is a lack of joint partnership which would leave every individual's needs unmet in one way or another, according to the social exchange theory. Both of these television series represent a spouse who behaves like one of the kids. The difference, as shown in *The Brady Bunch*, Carol is treated on the same level as the children because Mike wants and needs to have full control over his household, while in *Everybody Loves Raymond*,

Raymond chooses to act like a child to passively shift control and responsibility onto his wife Deborah.

If social exchange theory is about weighing the pros and cons of your relationship, why do we find these marital relationships so entertaining if they are so unbalanced? Is it because they provide a look into a full household working together to be a blended family, or a comedic husband who is just trying to take the easy route out of responsibility? Or maybe it is because it allows us to watch those TV families and compare and contrast their lives to our own? We are a symmetrical society. Our society thrives on fulfilling the American Dream. These TV families and marriages are a way for us to examine our own lives because that is what they are representing, a typical American family. Watching these shows allows us to feel better about our own personal relationships. We compare ourselves to them and see that our relationship is much happier than theirs or we think that at least there are more families in America that are just as dysfunctional as our own. The social exchange theory allows us to take an objective look into our relationships and determine whether or not they are balanced, and we view television sitcoms such as *The Brady Bunch* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, as entertaining and, subconsciously, examine our families and work to keep them in balance.

Television has allowed families to get a daily reminder of the importance to keep their families and romantic involvements in balance, thanks to the social exchange theory. It sets a stage to show families all perspectives and provides awareness to viewers on keeping their relationships balanced, even if they are unaware of the social exchange theory and what it explains. Simply put, according to Markey and Markey, social exchange theory demonstrates that relationships that are more satisfying will be more appealing and complementary than relationships that lack cooperation and commonality. With the aid of television, we can see

those happy and not-so-happy relationships on display for us to compare our own relationships to, no matter what the decade, with the social exchange theory.

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