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## Sitcom Moms: An Intersectional Case Study of Gender and Labor

Kathy Cacace



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## Sitcom Moms: An Intersectional Case Study of Gender and Labor

Kathy Cacace, University of Texas, Austin

### Overview

“The problem lay unburied, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century,” Betty Friedan famously wrote in 1963’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1). “Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’” (Friedan, 1). Friedan’s melancholy question encapsulated the set of concerns that would become central to liberal feminism: the image of the infantilized suburban housewife trapped within the domestic sphere, consumed by unpaid household work, her entrance into the male-dominated workplace the solution to her existential woe. The dichotomies of male vs. female, domestic work vs. paid work, private vs. public, and their seemingly inherent power struggles rely upon this singular conception of the white, middle-class, suburban mother performing feminized labor.

Patricia Hill Collins productively complicated this image by asserting that “work and family have rarely functioned as dichotomous spheres for women of color” (Collins 1994, 46). The legacy of American slavery, settler colonialism, and immigration policy compels women of color to perform “motherwork that challenges social constructions of work and family as separate spheres” and “the search for autonomy as the guiding human quest” (Collins, 47). Arlie Hochschild also interrogated the idea of women’s work, quantifying gendered care work and household maintenance as labor equivalent to a shift. For mothers who stay at home, this labor is an unpaid full-time occupation; for women who also work outside the home, care work becomes a “second shift” (Hochschild 2012). Friedan’s vision of women finding fulfillment by entering the workforce simply did not make sense for many women of color, and did not reduce the domestic burden on those (primarily white) women who made the leap.

The work of these scholars makes clear that motherhood can be an interesting intersectional case study for media students. Heather Dillaway and Elizabeth Pare further confirm the intersectionality of this social location in their investigation of motherhood discourses in American culture, noting that “connections between mothering, paid work, and individuals’ locations are even more complicated if we consider diverse groups of women by race/ethnicity and social class” because “motherhood ideology primarily assumes that women with children (or at least women worth writing about) possess a privileged status (e.g. White, college-educated, able to pursue a stable career, upper-middle class, and married with a spouse who earns a high level income)” (2008, 453).



Situation comedies entered the cultural conversation surrounding work and motherhood before even Betty Friedan, and television as a medium has been instrumental in solidifying and circulating hegemonic ideas about motherhood. Discussing traditional stay-at-home motherhood as a dominant ideology, Dillaway and Pare specifically call out “popular culture characters...such as June Cleaver from the television show *Leave It to Beaver*” who “cemented this hegemonic social construction and have been woven into the ideology surrounding motherhood, family and home ever since” (Dillaway and Pare 2008, 440). Television has reinforced the connection between women and domestic labor, centered the white, middle-class experience of motherhood, neglected or stereotyped mothers of color, and helped negatively frame mothers who “choose” to work against mothers who work as unwaged fulltime caregivers.

Even so, reflecting on mothers—both in sitcoms and in one’s own life—has the potential to provide many students an affective connection to intersectionality literature, feminist theory, and critical media studies.

### Rationale

*“Before I am a girl, I am black. Before I face sexism, I face racism. Before anyone takes note of my gender expression, their eyes focus on the color of my skin, a brown appearing golden in the sunlight. These are my intersections, social constructs that cross paths with each other to create my identity, and ironically, the things for which I am oppressed.”*

This quote comes from a 2016 *Teen Vogue* essay by young activist Eva Lewis, titled “Why I Am Passionate About Intersectionality.” She ties her understanding of her experience as a young black woman growing up on the south side of Chicago directly to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s definition of intersectionality, or the “various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions” of experience (Crenshaw 1991, 1244). The significance of the term appearing in a *Teen Vogue* headline about the expressed experiences of a young black woman illustrates the significant purchase the concept of intersectionality has gained outside academia. College students like Eva Lewis may come to the study of media with a nuanced scholarly understanding of intersectionality. Other students may have an intuitive knowledge of the term based on their lived experiences. Still others may be encountering the term for the first time.

This lesson plan was developed as part of a syllabus about gender and television that has several goals: to serve as an introduction to gender studies and feminist theory for students of media or communication, to embrace intersectionality in both course materials and method, and to allow students to practice multiple types of writing beyond the research paper. Alternative forms of writing such as criticism, screenwriting, and autoethnography allow students to explore the distance between their own—and others’—life experience and a host



of television representations, to pinpoint how these representations succeed or fall short, and to imagine a more diverse television landscape.

Numerous scholars have produced intersectional critiques of television. Their work deeply informs this lesson plan and models the kind of incisive inquiry students should attempt. I wish to call attention specifically to Sarah Janel Jackson's work on television news (Jackson 2013), Becca Cragin's work on talk shows (Cragin 2010), Christine Scodari's work on *Star Trek* fandom (Scodari 2012), and Raven S. Maragh's investigation of the intersections of identity and media technologies (Maragh 2016).

Kimberlé Crenshaw herself acknowledges the capacity of intersectionality to address categories beyond race and gender, "to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). This lesson plan embraces this capacity and uses the figure of the working mother as a cultural crossroads where gender, race, class, and other identities meet and interact. It also draws on McCall's framework for intersectional methodology, aligned with the *intracategorical complexity* approach wherein "complexity derives from the analysis of a social location at the intersection of single dimensions of multiple categories" (McCall 2005). The intracategorical approach allows this lesson plan to identify one media image—the mother—and use it to reveal "the range of diversity and difference within the group" (2005). While this approach may fail to interrogate the fundamental validity of identity-based categorization, it capitalizes on the often one-dimensional representations of identity in situation comedies in order to make comparisons and formulate critiques.

This lesson plan is intended for approximately 12-20 upper-level undergraduates in media studies or communication. By the end of this exercise, students will be able to:

- Understand the intracategorical complexity of "working mom," particularly as complicated by race, class, age, generation, and marital status
- Analyze and compare different representations of working motherhood on television
- Create a piece of personal writing that reflects on their childhood and media consumption

### **General Timeline (Class, screenings, and assignments)**

This lesson plan is designed to take place over two 60 to 90-minute classes and a screening section, or roughly one week of an undergraduate course. If a course does not have scheduled screening time, additional class time could be used to screen clips from each selected television episode. Viewing could also be assigned and made available on DVD via library reserve or through streaming platforms.

### **Class 1: Reflections on Media and Mothers**

*Assigned reading (to be completed before class)*



Dillaway, Heather and Elizabeth Pare. "Locating Mothers: How Cultural Debates About Stay-At-Home Versus Working Mothers Define Women and Home." *Journal of Family Issues* 29, no. 4 (April 2008): 437-464.

*Suggested secondary reading (to be completed before class)*

Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor. "Working Mothers Issue Brief."  
[https://www.dol.gov/wb/resources/WB\\_WorkingMothers\\_508\\_FinalJune13.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/wb/resources/WB_WorkingMothers_508_FinalJune13.pdf)

*In-class activity*

For the first half of class, the instructor should facilitate group discussion of the reading. Discussion questions may include:

- What is the dominant motherhood ideology in American culture?
- American culture often says that women "choose" to work. In what ways is this question insufficient?
- Dillaway and Pare ask: "But what do staying-at-home and working really mean?" How might we answer that question after reading their article?
- Dillaway and Pare also ask: "How can motherhood discourse tell us about our definitions of home and work locations and what women do in these spaces?"
- How do Dillaway and Pare use examples from the media to support their ideas? Can you think of others?

For the second half of class, the instructor should facilitate a lighthearted think-pair-share exercise upon which students can build their writing assignment.

- *Think*. Students should think or write for 3-5 minutes about their favorite television mom.
- *Pair*. Students should discuss their examples with a partner, focusing on why they particularly enjoy these examples.
- *Share*. Pairs should discuss their favorite television moms with the whole class. Time permitting, the class can begin to analyze what kinds of work these television moms perform.

*Writing assignment (to be turned in at instructor's discretion)*

Students should complete a reflective three to five-page journal entry about their own television consumption, the messages they have absorbed about work and motherhood, and the lessons they have learned from actual maternal figures involved in their lives.

Building on the in-class activity, each student should first reflect on the mothers they remember watching on television during their childhood. Questions to prompt reflection might include: Which TV moms did you love? Which did you dislike? What did you learn from them? What sorts of jobs did they have? Were they in or outside the home? How did other characters



respond to their housework, care work, and paid career work? Students should be encouraged to dig into specific examples.

The student should then compare these representations to the maternal figures in their own life. Questions to prompt reflection might include: Was their mother different than or similar to the mothers they watched on television? Did she work in a different location or industry? Did she look different, or speak differently? How did she complement or complicate the picture of motherhood they saw on television?

Please note that the second piece of this journal assignment requires personal reflection about family relationships. Not all students feel comfortable discussing their relationship with their mother, or have a relationship to discuss. Instructors should stress that students can write about any maternal (or parental) figure: a friend's mother, a grandmother or aunt, an influential teacher or babysitter, a father, etc. Alternatively, an instructor may choose to eliminate this portion of the assignment and focus solely on sitcom moms.

### Screening: Selected Sitcoms

As mentioned in the schedule section above, these episodes may be screened during a dedicated screening time, during class, or assigned as pre-class viewing. Many of these selected episodes are available on network streaming sites for free, or else through Netflix, Hulu, or other common subscription services.

This lesson plan is designed to allow an instructor freedom to choose episodes they and their students will find engaging. The screening should include at least two episodes for later comparison activities, though more may be needed depending on class size. Instructors should choose episodes that depict motherhood differently, intersecting with various identities and systems of oppression. I do believe it helps to choose one example of hegemonic motherhood to echo the Dillaway and Pare reading and to bring issues of white and class-based privilege into later classroom conversation. For the purposes of this assignment, I have defined "hegemonic" motherhood as white, middle-class, married, and not employed outside the home.

The appendix to this lesson plan contains titles and plot descriptions for specific episodes from television programs in the table below. These episodes directly address issues of work and motherhood and, when compared to each other, demonstrate the intracategorical complexity of motherhood as a social location.

Ageism	Hegemonic	Mothers of Color	Immigrant
<i>Younger</i>	<i>I Love Lucy</i>	<i>Family Matters</i>	<i>Fresh Off the Boat</i>
	<i>Leave It to Beaver</i>	<i>Fresh Off the Boat</i>	
	<i>Modern Family</i>	<i>Good Times</i>	
		<i>One Day at a Time</i>	



Single Mothers	Work as Fulfillment	Working Class	Workplace Bias
<i>Gilmore Girls</i>	<i>Bob's Burgers</i>	<i>Family Matters</i>	<i>Family Matters</i>
<i>Murphy Brown</i>	<i>The Simpsons</i>	<i>Good Times</i>	<i>One Day at a Time</i>
<i>One Day at a Time</i>		<i>Roseanne</i>	
<i>Younger</i>			

## Class 2: Intersectional Analysis

### *In-class Activity 1: Pair discussion*

**Activity:** Students should be broken into pairs and assigned one of the screenings. For approximately 10-15 minutes, students should answer the following questions:

1. Describe your sitcom mom's identity as fully as you can.
2. Describe the work she does both inside and outside the home.
3. How is her work compensated? Consider emotional responses as well as financial remuneration.
4. What are her obstacles or advantages regarding work? How are they connected to her identity?

**Goals:** This activity allows students to explore one TV mom's identity and how it colors her experience of domestic and wage labor. Pairs will chart one woman's many identities—her gender, race, class, ability, age, sexuality, and so forth. The discussion points are intended to help them pinpoint broad gender-based concerns (like uncompensated care work) as well as how those concerns are impacted by one mother's privileges and/or interlocking oppressions (such as the Conner's class-based precarity on *Roseanne* or Jessica Huang's status as American cultural outsider on *Fresh Off the Boat*).

### *In-class Activity 2: Group discussion*

**Activity:** Pairs should then form groups of four with a team that worked on a different screening. For approximately 15-20 minutes, the groups of four should answer the following questions:

1. *What's different?* How do your moms' identities, performances of motherhood, work experiences, and choices differ?
2. *What's the same?* How are your mom's identities, performances of motherhood, and work experiences similar?
3. How do your moms conform to and depart from the dominant American motherhood ideology? Do their identities play a role?
4. What messages do you think your sitcoms communicate about gender, race, ethnicity, class, marital status, and/or age?



**Goals:** This small-group discussion allows students to contrast different TV moms and their experiences of work and motherhood. Where the first activity helped the students get to know one TV mom, the questions above ask them to consider how different, possibly marginalized identities result in different, possibly unjust experiences. This comparison is intended to identify common gender-based oppressions, but to complicate any hegemonic images of what a working mother is, does, or looks like. Important themes that may emerge might be (but are not limited to) workplace bias and harassment, the so-called “second shift” of domestic labor, financial precarity, systemic racism and sexism, white privilege, and career choice vs. work of necessity.

### *In-class Activity 3: Class discussion*

**Activity:** All groups should then come together to discuss their findings for the remainder of the class. Summary discussion questions may include:

- What, if anything, did you find in common between the different representations of working moms?
- What were the biggest differences between the representations?
- Is caregiving portrayed differently than paid work outside the home?
- Which TV moms felt the most realistic, or the most fictional? Why do you think that is?
- How do our comparisons relate to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality? Put differently: is there such a thing as a “typical” or “traditional” working mother? Who are we talking about when we refer to “traditional” motherhood?
- How and why does television use race, class, and other identities as a counterpoint to the June Cleaver stereotype?
- In what ways are your real mothers/maternal figures different than the TV mothers you analyzed?

**Goals:** These discussion questions are designed to allow some reflection on the students’ newly complicated picture of working motherhood and to build their own connections to Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality. Encouraging the students to bring their own maternal figures into the conversation to whatever degree they are comfortable prompts consideration of the remaining distance between idealized sit-com motherhood and their own complex realities.

### **Conclusion**

In her reflection on the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Kaila Adia Story notes: “The dominant portrayal of what is, and what it means to be a ‘mother,’ however, remains locked within a reductive and imaginary prism of white supremacy, heteronormativity, and sexism. Feminist scholarship in conjunction with motherhood studies has expanded, and continues to expand, our own analysis as citizens of what motherhood actually looks like within a lived context” (Story, 1). By the end of this unit, students will have used television as a vehicle to explore these reductive images and perhaps begin feminist inquiries into their own lived contexts.





Through the readings, activities, screenings, and written reflections of this unit, students will have the opportunity to engage with the definition of intersectionality, use diverse images of sit-com moms to illustrate the intersectionality and its interlocking oppressions through intracategorical complexity, and reflect on the distance that remains between television and real women's lives. By examining TV moms' common and unique oppressions, students will excavate deeply engrained American cultural discourses that are reinforced through television media.

### Appendix: Episode Descriptions

#### *Bob's Burgers* S3E14: "Lindapendent Woman"

**Identity categories:** White, working class, married

**Summary:** Linda Belcher excels at a part-time job outside the family restaurant, causing a rift with her husband Bob. She quits the family restaurant to work at her new job full time, which ends in disaster.

#### *Family Matters*, S1E2: "Two-Income Family"

**Identity categories:** African-American, middle class, married

**Summary:** Harriet Winslow asks for a raise and loses her job as an elevator operator.

The family relies on her income, so she must advocate strongly for another position.

#### *Fresh Off the Boat* S1E6: "Fajita Man"

**Identity categories:** Asian, middle-class, married, immigrant

**Summary:** Main character Eddie learns the value of work in the family restaurant, while his mother, Constance (one of just a handful of Asian mothers ever depicted on American television) tries to find a job and learns her forceful personality can be an obstacle or an asset.

#### *Gilmore Girls* S1E1: "Pilot"

**Identity categories:** White, working class, wealthy, single, emphasized femininity, (former) teen mother

**Summary:** Lorelai Gilmore left her very wealthy family behind when she became pregnant as a teenager. When she is unable to pay her daughter's private high school tuition, she must ask her parents for money.

#### *Good Times* S6E04: "Florida Gets a Job"

**Identity categories:** African American, working class, married



**Summary:** Florida applies for a part-time job as a school bus driver, but runs up against nepotism in the process.

*I Love Lucy* S2E4: “Job Switching”

**Identity categories:** White, middle class, married, homemaker

**Summary:** Though Lucy is not yet a mother, this episode illuminates traditional assumptions about male and female work. Lucy and Ethel “switch” jobs with Desi and Fred; the men attempt housework, while the women work at a chocolate factory.

*Leave it to Beaver* S3E31: “Mother’s Day Composition”

**Identity categories:** White, middle-class, married, emphasized femininity, stay-at-home mother

**Summary:** “Beaver” Cleaver is asked to write a composition about the career his mother had “before marrying.” Representing the pinnacle of 1950s traditional motherhood, June Cleaver has rarely worked outside the home. Beaver lies about her background to make it “exciting.”

*Modern Family*, S5E2: “First Days”

**Identity categories:** White, upper-middle-class, married, emphasized femininity

**Summary:** Claire—heretofore a stay-at-home mother—returns to work at her father’s company. She tries to get to her coworkers to see her as a person, not just the boss’s daughter.

*Murphy Brown*, S5E1 and S5E2: “You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato”

**Identity categories:** White, wealthy, single, pregnant

**Summary:** Murphy, a successful newscaster, is a single new mother. These episodes were written in response to (and incorporate) real-life criticism by then Vice President Dan Quayle, who said that *Murphy Brown* was “mocking the importance of fathers.”

*One Day at a Time* S1E2: “Bobos and Mamas”

**Identity categories:** Latina, middle-class, divorced, veteran

**Summary:** Penelope has a confrontation with a male coworker who does not pull his weight in the office. The episode looks at three different generations of Latina women and their relationship to patriarchy.

*Roseanne*, S1E19: “Workin’ Overtime”

**Identity categories:** White, working class, married, fat



**Summary:** Roseanne struggles to manage her family responsibilities and exploitative shifts at a plastic factory.

*The Simpsons*, S6E23: “The Springfield Connection”

**Identity categories:** Arguably white, lower middle-class, married, stay at home mother

**Summary:** Marge joins the Springfield police force in order to break up her routine, but finds that everyone—including her family—is breaking the law.

*Younger* S1E1: “Pilot”

**Identity categories:** White, financially insecure, divorced, emphasized femininity, middle-aged (emphasized in plot)

**Summary:** When Liza’s husband squanders all her money, she divorces him and must enter the workforce. Having been a stay-at-home mother, she has trouble securing an entry-level job due to her age and lack of experience. Though she is 40, she poses as a 26-year-old in order to get a job as an editorial assistant in a publishing house.



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