

Megan McCarron-Haber
Professor Amanda McDonnell
What's So Funny? The Real World Impact of Sitcom Depictions of Class

Abstract

Situational comedies that depict life in a working class family do so at the expense of the class they are satirizing. The characters are typically unconnected with real world situations and depict and reinforce negative stereotypes about class and gender. Any real quest for upward mobility is belittled. The underlying subtext is the retention of clearly defined class boundaries.

Situational comedies were some of the first programs to be aired on broadcast television and remain an incredibly popular form of entertainment today. They have remained largely unchanged over the last sixty years. Sitcoms are easy to produce, and easy to watch. They require little thought or engagement on the part of the audience even including laugh tracks that cue the home viewer when a punch line has been delivered. Story lines are formulaic and vary little between shows and networks. Certain tropes are present in all. But does banal imply benign, or are the sitcoms reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating class distinctions?

A common theme for many sitcoms is a depiction of life in a working class household and the trials and tribulations of the family members trying to improve their lot in life. The settings are fraught with contradictions that aren't necessarily a reflection of real life situations. The perpetuation of the genre begs the question that can be asked in the larger context of comedy - Is the viewer laughing "with" or "at" them. Is humor ameliorating the tensions between the classes or reinforcing the reasons for the distinctions?

Contradictions are everywhere in sitcoms that portray working class life. Main characters working in blue collar positions live in nice suburban neighborhoods. While they may complain about expenses, they are not seen as doing without. The underlying context perpetuates a certain life style as comfortable which, even if unattainable, must be coveted. If a working class viewer

in the audience has failed to achieve this level of comfort with their minimum wage paycheck, he or she must be a failure. Serious damage is done here to the working class when the setup for such contradictions disparages the workers for their shortcomings.

Stereotypical characterizations of life in a working class household don't help either. Fathers are commonly depicted as stupid, lazy, scheming, and generally worthless to the family, except for the occasional good laugh these weaknesses provide. In sitcoms, if characters fail, it is because of some fault of their own. The faults of the lower classes that cause them to remain lower class are funny in the world of sitcoms and the worlds of people who watch them. Herein lays the danger. When depictions of class fault the poor for their own circumstances, even when done in the context of humor and entertainment, it simultaneously promotes the idea that poverty is not a societal problem; rather it is quaint and funny and not really all *that* bad.

To laugh at a subject is to distance one from, and in some cases to dehumanize, them. Laughter also reinforces feelings of superiority in the viewer. Thus, through humor, sitcoms enable the middle and upper classes feel good about themselves (i.e. for not being poor). Simultaneously the lower class is told "this is what the world thinks of you, you should really try to get better, like the characters in these television shows." Sitcoms completely ignore real life socioeconomic patterns and structures if examined closely often defy the notion of the American dream and the promise of upward mobility.

This creates an incredibly difficult situation for those who are members of lower socioeconomic classes. It displays an ideal they are supposed to achieve while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that they will never be able to achieve it. While some members of the television audience will see these depictions as being truthful or honest, in actuality these audience members have been successfully brainwashed by popular depictions of class in these

sitcoms. These stereotypical depictions are not restricted to class, but as well convey messages about the proper roles of race and gender in the real world. Class, race, and gender dynamics are very closely linked in America, and yet many of these important differences are glossed over in situational comedies. Instead, the failure of various characters is portrayed as being the fault of that individual; they're stupid, they're lazy, they're difficult and abrasive, instead of closely examining social systems and hurdles which are almost impossible to overcome.

A popular humor theory known as superiority theory is important in understanding why the producers of these sitcoms perpetuate these same tired tropes of class in America, and why the audience still finds it funny. Berger states in his article "The Problem of Laughter: Philosophical Approaches to Humor" that "all humor is connected to the sense of superiority the person laughing feels about the person, or persons laughed at" (38). In other words, the humorous subject is seen as inferior to the humorist, and therefore deserving of ridicule. In these sitcoms the behaviors and lifestyles of lower class people are the sources of their humor and the audience readily laughs at these jokes because they inherently feel superior to these individuals. The jokes reinforce the idea that upper classes are better than lower classes and that everyone should strive to leave their lower class mannerisms and lifestyles behind.

Knowing this, it can now easily be seen that superiority theory is a major operator within sitcom comedy, especially in relation to depictions of class. For example, in the pilot episode of *The George Lopez Show* the audience is introduced to the titular character, George Lopez, who is the first member of the assembly line at a Los Angeles Airplane parts factory, to be promoted to the position of plant manager. Many of the jokes of the episode revolve around the fact that Lopez, the lowly assembly line worker, now has all the responsibilities of a middle-class manager, but none of the skills. He is shown interacting with his new employees, formerly his

comrades on the assembly line, suggesting he does not know how to navigate this difficult new class status. Ultimately, in the episode George's new boss tells him he needs to either fire his best friend or his mother, who is also a worker on the assembly line at the plant. At the end of the episode George fires his mother and is then met by his shocked boss saying it was just a test of Lopez's loyalty. Jack, the boss, seems incredulous when he reveals to George that this was just a test, implying to the audience that it was George's mistake to not understand the way managerial positions work, and by extension, how to appropriately behave in a higher class setting. As the audience, we are assumed to be of Jack's class status, sympathizing with him and understanding the demands on George Lopez. Herein lies the humor ("Prototype").

We see a similar application of superiority theory in "Getting Up the Rent" the pilot for the popular sitcom *Good Times*. The plot of this episode is that the Evans family needs to procure the \$74 for the rent this month. However, we see them go about this in unconventional means. This episode sets up the tone for the series by portraying various members of the Evans family, including the father, and oldest son, as lazy, scheming, and always trying to make a buck. James Evans, the head of the household's plan is to go to the pool hall and try to hustle some money for the rent. J.J. (James Jr) also schemes (it is implied that he learned such behavior from his father) meanwhile the women of the family go to the welfare office to get some money, legally. While simultaneously setting up the narrative that the Evanses hate this life, hate living this way, and all that they desire is to be out of the ghetto and in a better life, it clearly shows the viewers why they are unable to achieve the upward mobility they so desire. The men of the family (who are implied to be the true heads of households and responsible for their current situation) are lazy, do not wish to work hard to earn a living, and instead choose to scheme their way out of the sticky situations they have gotten themselves into financially. The finale of the

series, “The End of the Rainbow” shows the Evanses problems miraculously disappearing. An injured family member miraculously is healed, and able to pursue the football scholarship, which is displayed to be his only way out of the ghetto in the first place (and therefore a tragedy when lost.) The father, James Evans, finally gets a good job and other members of the family are able to get out of the ghetto thanks to the good nature and will of more successful friends. It’s interesting that the Evanses are supposed to be a model to be followed; they classically depict a low wage family who is at fault for their poor socioeconomic circumstances. The series supposedly ends on a positive note with the Evanses getting out of the ghetto thanks to James Evans’ new, lucrative job, however there is also the underlying message that there was luck involved. It would have been radical of the creators to admit that Kieth (the injured football player) would have to find an alternative way of improving his life due to his injury, but instead, it’s magically healed. What if he were to have remained injured? This would have left the series on a poor note, and portraying a less than American message. Kieth would have been punished for putting all of his hopes on a sports scholarship, but then he was correct in doing so because a low-class black family cannot gain success in any other way. This convenient ending allows the audience to still feel superior to the Evans family, even though it’s implied they will not have attained a class status equal to that of the assumed audience. *Good Times* hints at the strong correlation and interconnections of race and class in American society, without committing to highlighting the societal structures that reinforce these ideas of normative race and class behavior.

When class structures are truly examined in this country it is easily evident that the key to success is not only hard work and dedication, but also a bit of luck (and white male privilege). This of course is not what *The Jefferson* (1975-1985) and *Good Times* (1974-1979) would have

us believe. In these shows we have two examples of “typical” African-American families. *The Jeffersons*’ family has made it out of the ghetto, thanks to the hard work and dedication of the father building a successful laundromat empire. In the sitcom *Good Times* we have a poor black family, the Evanses, whose main goal in life is to make it out of the ghetto, a task the audience sees them fail to achieve on a weekly basis. Both of these families are African-American, yet aside from specific “special interest” episodes, their race is rarely mentioned and is not given any context in relations to their class status. This is contrary to what is known to be true, that race affects one’s experiences of class in this country (Allison).

Other popular sitcom characters include Fran Fine, a working class Jewish girl from Queens in *The Nanny* who is now hobnobbing, and attempting to ingratiate herself with her wealthy employers. Here class and social status are mentioned often; George Jefferson may now be a wealthy man, but he still only has his lower-class social skills to work with in *The Jeffersons*. George Lopez spends his raise on toys he doesn’t need, instead of investing in his family’s future in *The George Lopez Show*. James Evans, the father and husband in *Good Times* is constantly discussing how much he wants to get himself and his family out of the lower class; the source of humor in the episodes is usually the inevitable failure of his get rich quick schemes.

This pattern illustrates and reinforces the ideas of upward mobility; one can improve their situation in life, if they just put the work in. Those who do not work hard, will not be successful and will remain in the poor house. George Jefferson the father and husband figure of *The Jeffersons* did work hard to make his laundry business a success; he didn’t take short cuts and is rewarded for his efforts. There’s a caveat however: even though he’s financially attained a heightened class status, he and his family still portray every low and working class stereotype.

In *Good Times*, failure to attain middle class status is also the source of comedy for the show. Plot lines show the failure of the characters to achieve affluence with schemes and “sure things” instead of hard work and dedication. Donna Langston explains this phenomenon in her article “Tired of Playing Monopoly?” when she discusses the myth of social mobility. She says:

How about if you’re born and raised poor or working-class, yet through struggle, usually through education, you manage to achieve a different economic level; do you become middle class? Can you pass? I think some working class people may successfully assimilate into the middle class by learning to dress, talk, and act middle class...to succeed in the middle-class world means facing great pressures to abandon working-class friends and ways” (396).

Langston is saying that regardless of the fact of becoming more financially successful, and thus technically entering higher class than the one born into, people will never be able to rid themselves of their original class. Truly accomplished people will always be able to pick a “poser” out of the crowd, because they will be unable to rid themselves of working-class sensibilities. It is these sensibilities that keep George Jefferson cheap, despite his hard-earned wealth. The subtext is that he must hold on tightly to his money because it could run out any time. This would be a bad turn of events, and one that must be avoided at all costs.

The use of humor and comedy within the sitcom medium is integral in this idea on two fronts. One it implies that a middle class lifestyle is possible on any salary, but also, through humorous depictions of lazy or stupid characters, reiterates the idea that despite attaining all the technical markers of middle class status, one will remain a low class worker at heart (Banville 18-21). One cannot pass and become accepted into the middle class community because they will always retain their quaint, and amusing low class traits, and thus, no matter how hard they try, these workers will always be the butt of the joke to their neighbors and peers (Scharrer 25). The constant trials and failures of James Evans in *Good Times* illustrates a contradiction, in the

messages surrounding upward mobility in sitcoms; upward mobility and heightened class status is to be desired and coveted, citizens must do everything they can to attain this heightened status, however, those who have already attained it (or were, more likely, born into it) will laugh at these attempts all along the way, and this is your burden as a lower class citizen. We see this in a more recent situational comedy, as well - *The George Lopez Show*, where the father character, George Lopez, moves up from the factory floor to a managerial position. It is a promotion which brings with it benefits and lifestyle changes, with laugh lines surrounding George's difficulty making the transition.

One notable exception to this norm was the popular sitcom *Roseanne* which originally ran from 1988 to 1997 and is still broadcast in syndication 15 years after its cancellation. Roseanne Barr the executive producer, creator, and eponymous character always pushed to make sure the Lanfords (her fictional family) were depicted in a realistic manner relative to their class. Barr often pushed to maintain the distinct feminist tone of the show, an endeavor that resulted in Barr's being labeled difficult (to put it mildly) in the press (Weinraub). This image as a "bitchy," difficult woman discredits Roseanne Barr's message, painting her to be a radical and an exception and again providing an explanation for her character's economic hardship by finding fault in the individual. (Senzani 229-230). In addition, there have been studies that show audiences often have difficulty extricating the meaningful message behind satire, one such study conducted by Charles Gruner in 1965, showed that while audiences understood the humorous, exaggerated content, they did not understand the societal ill it was trying to highlight (150-52). As a result, the world is left with the example of *Roseanne*, a show which successfully challenged class paradigms perpetuated on primetime sitcoms.

When the working class stand up comedienne Roseanne Barr decided to dip her toes in

the sitcom game, she wanted to do it differently. In an interview when she was asked about her lifestyle and that of her fictional TV counterpart she said that "nobody has really been able to replicate the family or class thing on television" continuing to say that the reason for this was that because the executives behind the production decisions were not working class people themselves, they didn't know what it was really like growing up and living that way and were depicting ideas of what they thought working-class life was like, instead of realistic, critical depictions. *Roseanne* was successful because she was able to do all of this, while still being perceived as funny. (Weinraub)

To see the differences between *Roseanne* and other sitcoms, one only need to look at an episode. In the pilot we are exposed to a situation that as an audience we are not used to. The Lanfords live in a house, this is true, but it is small, crowded, and in disarray. The audience is introduced to Roseanne Lanford in the first five minutes of the program, and immediately shown her interactions with her husband. She is far from the depiction of the ideal wife, giving her husband cheek and lip when he asks her, tiredly, "Is there coffee?" The true golden joke comes when Becky Lanford, starts taking cans out of the family's pantry. When Roseanne asks Becky, the perfect daughter, who works hard in school and is rewarded for it with good grades and popularity, why she's taking food Becky responds that "our school is having a food drive for poor people" to which Roseanne answers "well tell them to bring some of that food over here." This is far from the ideal situation and the Lanfords know it. They are dysfunctional, but generally happy in their blue-collar lifestyle. Over the nine seasons of the series we see conflict and a proactive nature amongst them when they are blatantly wronged, however in generally most of the members are just attempting to get by, and not, as other sitcoms would proscribe, trying to get out of Lanford and low-class status.

One more episode of *Roseanne* which epitomizes its contrast to every other sitcom of its time (and before and after) is the season five episode entitled “Terms of Estrangement: Part 1.” In this episode, Becky, who has always worked hard in school, seeing it as her way out of her parents’ home, learns that her family can’t afford to send her to college. Regardless of the fact that she did everything “right” she is barred from achieving her American dream because of her family’s low socioeconomic status. This is a truth many Americans are forced to deal with every year, and they do in various ways, but it goes against everything media and sitcom depictions of low class families stands for. It violates the idea of upward mobility, because regardless of having done the necessary work and taking the necessary steps, Becky still fails. This is not to say everyone from a low socioeconomic status will fail at such endeavors, but it’s careless of sitcoms to portray these societal roadblocks as nonexistent. It’s something known in the real world, that does not translate to sitcom television because it does not fit the narrative they are trying to portray. Low class individuals are not going to be motivated to work hard at hopes of getting out of their low class status if there may be forces out of their control preventing their success.

The importance in all of this conversation is of course the fact that the various depictions of class in American situational comedy affect and shape the real world understandings of class, race, and gender dynamics. Sitcoms would have their audiences believe there is very little difference between the classes or even that the United States is a class free society. When this assertion is made, the idea that if one is a member of the working class they are too stupid, lazy, and selfish to rise above their meager circumstances is reinforced. They deserve to be in the working class, and should stay in the working class.

If society believes those workers who are low income are there of their own accord and lack of ambition it is easier to write them off as unimportant, and neglect their wants and needs. Beth Shulman, in her book *The Betrayal of Work: How Low Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans and their Families*, discusses the plight of the working class American, in the real world. She says “[for] generations, Americans shared a[n]... understanding that if you worked hard, a livable income and basic securities were to be yours,” a statement which she goes on to argue is no longer true in the American industrial complex, concluding that the “promise [of the American dream] has been broken and as a nation we have been living a lie” (13).

Society is more likely to dismiss the needs of the lower working class, if their problems are portrayed as funny to the upper classes. The humorous tone of sitcoms distracts the audience from analyzing the content, and questioning the paradigms, all while reinforcing stereotypical ideals, through a soft-sell approach.

Sitcoms, with their homogeneous and repetitive story lines convey these messages of the working class. Why aren't these more sympathetic or realistic depictions of working class Americans? How many working class individuals work to create, write, and produce situational comedies? The middle and upper class members are happy with their place in the class structure in this country. Why shouldn't they? They reap all of its benefits. To disenfranchise and disengage the working class is to create a lower class of almost slaves. People who believe, if they are failing, it is their fault. They too, should be able to afford a large suburban home on a UPS worker's salary. They too should be able to support a family of five on the welfare checks. These images create an “us” and “them” mentality between the classes, where one group is the working class and the other is everybody who does not identify themselves as working class (regardless of their true socioeconomic status). Many people who view themselves as working

class would, when their socioeconomic standing is examined, technically be classified as lower class, and they don't even know it! (Allison 48).

The inaccurate depictions of the working class in American sitcoms have served to establish the norm of the hardworking American and the attainability of the American dream. By neglecting to depict a truly classed society, in which each class is accurately represented, sitcoms portray stereotypes that allow the upper classes to blame lower classes for their own circumstances. This frees them from any examination of the societal structures that attempt to suppress social mobility.

Television programming is a vehicle for promoting desire. Sitcom actors and other comedians have been long standing staples of the advertising world. They are product spokesmen in commercials and use their shows to depict desirable lifestyles. In an article discussing the increased use of “funny faces” in advertising, Stuart Elliot explains that, especially in times when the economy is in a downturn “a soft sell can often work better than a head-on approach” (Elliot). Although he does not focus his discussion on product placement in sitcoms themselves, the relationship between sitcoms and commercials is symbiotic; the stars appear in the commercials, and the products appear in the shows. The soft-sell approach is the main idea behind product placement in television: if a viewer sees a character they like using a product, he or she is more likely to want that product.

This can be a dangerous practice when viewed in concert with the underlying propagandist class messages on television. In *The King of Queens* the audience is introduced to Doug Heffernan a blue collar worker, and head of the household played by comedian Kevin James. Doug is drives a delivery truck for the fictitious International Parcel Service. His wife, Carrie, is a secretary in Manhattan. One can assume both of these jobs are low paying ones, and

for all intents and purposes the two should be living a frugal lifestyle (not to mention the fact that Carrie's retired father lives with them, and support him financially.) However, we see them living in a large suburban home, wanting for nothing (although they are constantly griping about their money troubles). Robert Weir says, in his book *Class in America: Q-Z*, that this is a contemporary example of the working class character setup in sitcoms. The wife is portrayed as threatening and emasculating for working outside the home, and the husband, although hard-working, behaves child-like and simple-minded. The characters' lifestyles are not indicative of their class status; their flaws are (852-853).

The idea is clear: work hard for social mobility so you can buy these things and live this wonderful life; however you will always be working class. This sends a mixed messages to audiences, creating, what Weir terms "class anxieties" specific to the humorous, sitcom specific tropes (853). Again, the message is augmented through the use of humor, simultaneously soft-selling the messages of what it means to be successful while absolving the corporations and the infrastructure of any real blame.

At this point sitcoms and society have created a self-perpetuating cycle that is hard to break. With *Roseanne* audiences caught a fresh break from the otherwise constant perpetuation of working class stereotypes. Ms. Barr accomplished that by taking a strong stand for the inclusion of real-life situations and settings, believing that humor and a true message would appeal to audiences. Unfortunately it remains the exception to the rule as we see continue to see the same types of shows premiering season after season.

Only by demanding new, varied, representations in the media will audiences see a change in content. This demand need not, and should not, be limited merely to class depictions; accurate and varied depictions of race and gender are scarce on our televisions too. Only by

reflecting the world which they are trying to portray and entertain with, will today's sitcoms be able to surpass the model set by those shows that came before them.

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