PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Exploring Transformation: An Analysis of Culture, Identity & Borderlands*

Article 13

2013

He's Just a Man: Power Imbalance Between Female and Male Characters in American Sitcoms

Wenona Kimbro
Portland State University

Recommended Citation
Kimbro, Wenona (2013) "He's Just a Man: Power Imbalance Between Female and Male Characters in American Sitcoms," *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 13.
https://doi.org/10.15760/mcnair.2013.44

Portland State University McNair Research Journal 2013

He's Just a Man: Power imbalance between female and male characters in American sitcoms

By Wenona Kimbro
Faculty mentor: Dr. Kimberley Brown, Ph.D.

Kimbro, W. *He's just a man: Power imbalance between female and male characters in American sitcoms.* Portland State University McNair Scholars Online Journal, Vol. 7, 2013

ABSTRACT:

This paper describes the occurrence and context of dismissive, condescending, and infantilizing linguistic behavior as used by female characters toward male characters in stable heterosexual partnerships portrayed in American entertainment television. This study is based on grounded theory, in that the initial interpretive framework for the analysis stemmed from preliminary data gathered in the study; this working framework directed the analytical approach during subsequent data processing, and was then further developed in response to the overall findings. The methodology used in this study is discourse analysis, an applied linguistic method of studying small units of spoken and written language, such as sentences or individual words, within the larger context of a conversation. In the sample examined in this study, a conversation comprises an exchange of pre-written conversational dialogue in a televised scene. This study examines sitcom interactions between fictional spouses to determine how frequently and in what contexts power-imbalanced exchanges occur. For the purpose of exploring possible ways in which relational power imbalances have been absorbed into American popular culture, the discourse data is drawn from three American sitcoms broadcast during prime time from open-access channels: *Modern Family*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Rules of Engagement*. Such interactions within this data sample are individually coded, and discussion of the findings focuses on the extent to which they reinforce gender stereotypes which rely on power imbalance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The initial idea for this project took shape around a series of cursory observations I made while recreationally watching sitcom reruns on television in 2010—a seemingly innocuous beginning to a formal study of gender interaction in entertainment media. As a person who rarely watches television, the behavior I began to notice struck me as remarkably negative, and I wondered if these were just random occurrences or if they might follow some sort of pattern. The impetus for organizing that curiosity into a more formal linguistic inquiry, and indeed the primary motivation for my commitment to this project, stems from a desire to contribute new knowledge that may aid in the ongoing effort to improve gender relations and establish new relational paradigms based on genuine equality.

In this study, the skill set and academic perspective I bring to bear on my research question primarily stem from an evolving interest in critical applied linguistics, a subdiscipline which is by its very nature interdisciplinary. This approach to analyzing language takes the basic tenets of applied linguistics beyond the descriptive study of language use, to the level of identifying elements that are socially problematic and examining possible alternatives that would mediate the resulting social problems. More specifically, the analytical approach utilized in this study is that of critical discourse analysis as described by Van Dijk (2001):

> Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. (p. 352)

In this study of gender interaction, I have chosen to focus on female linguistic behaviors popularized in entertainment media, through which women are characterized as establishing power over men—*characterized* being the operative word. In this context, I would argue that the kinds of behaviors examined in this study are not only ineffective at redressing gender inequality, but in fact reinforce women's disempowerment while at the same time hurting their partners. Generally speaking, people initiate romantic relationships with the goal of maintaining happiness and emotional safety, for themselves if not also for their partners. The underlying question, then, is

concerned with what we as viewers are taking in, and how television images may be informing our beliefs about appropriate ways of relating to people we love.

As a woman who has come of age in an era during which the conversation around feminism has taken many different turns simultaneously, I find the question of how men and women are to engage in healthy intimacy with each other to be a complicated one in spite of all the discussion, both popular and academic. Given my objectives as a critical researcher, it is both appropriate and necessary to acknowledge that I am included in the group whose behavior I am examining. In the above-referenced article, Van Dijk (2001) characterizes this kind of "explicit awareness of [one's] role in society" as being "crucial for critical discourse analysts" (p. 352). Accordingly, I should also acknowledge that my social role is less conventionally heteronormative than those presented in this sample. While my personal history with intimate relationships does include heterosexual marriage, it also includes significant non-marital romantic relationships with both women and men, and many friendships with individuals who identify as transgender or genderqueer. The issues of equality and respect that lie at the heart of this project are important to everyone at every point on the gender and sexuality continuum; however, due to its limitations on time and funding, this project focuses solely on heterosexual relationships as depicted in a modest sample of popular entertainment media.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As observed by Mille and McIlvenny (2000), "It has often been pointed out that traditional linguistics has usually been conducted by men, for men, and about men, with men's language practices as the invisible norm by which we measure language use"—a practice which has often led to the implication that women's language choices, rather than men's, ought to change (p. 20-21).

While this analysis is focused on female linguistic behaviors, its element of cultural critique necessitates that I acknowledge this male-normative tradition in linguistic research. Again, concerns around women's self-empowerment are essential to this study; although it is true that my explicit position is to recommend alternative behaviors, I am not pointing to male behavior as a source of such alternatives. While it is common, and appropriately so, for both popular and academic texts to problematize men's double-standards and disrespectful behavior toward women, there is less formal discussion around similar treatment of men by women, and how this may at times contribute to women's difficulties in achieving true gender equality.

When introducing such a topic, it becomes particularly important to acknowledge the frequency with which women are blamed for the very behaviors used to deprive them of dignity and well-being. Whether or not women's responses of pain and frustration ever actually culminate in problematic behavior, those responses are often characterized as the cause of subsequent (or even the initial) abuse and disempowerment. This pattern of deflection and blaming is starkly exemplified in a 2009 study of Japanese television advice programs. In the transcribed conversations, female adultery is unilaterally condemned, while male adultery is expressed linguistically in terms of illness, minimizing men's responsibility for their own behavior and instead focusing on the behavior of their female partners (Saft & Ohara, 2009).

Nevertheless, without dismissing the impact of such insults to intelligence and dignity, I would assert that it is in a woman's best interest to be aware of the kind of power she is gaining or maintaining, and to be able to judge whether it is a positive form of personal power or merely the kind of hierarchal power that comes at another's expense. While one might argue that any method of reclaiming power is positive when one is at a disadvantage, Glick et al. (2004) report that their "16-nation study involving 8,360 participants revealed that hostile and benevolent [sexist] attitudes toward men, assessed by the Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory (P Glick & S. T. Fiske, 1996), were… negatively correlated with gender equality in cross-national comparisons" (p. 713).

In keeping with Mille and McIlvenny's (2000) statement about how studies of men's linguistic behavior have become the standard for comparison, a media study based on social role theory describes how "gender stereotypes posit that men represent the ideal or norm against which women are judged" (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008, p. 201). Thus, women engaging in hostile or sexist discourse strategies could potentially be seen as engaging in a kind of role-reversal, in which they adopt stereotypically male strategies for establishing and maintaining power over others. However, as feminist psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller (2003) points out, situational reversals in power dynamics between individuals do nothing to change the broader institutional structures that create and maintain inequality (p. 147).

As sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1994) states in the very first sentence of her book *Gender & Discourse*, "[e]ntering the arena of research on gender is like stepping into a maelstrom" (p. 3). As she goes on to elaborate, questions of gender "touch people where they live," and in finding answers, the corresponding academic dialogue crosses disciplines in such a way that the discussion itself becomes "a kind of cross-cultural communication" (p. 3).

Accordingly, I have approached this project with a sense of realism about the number of academic disciplines that intersect in a critical analysis that is not only concerned with language use, but also with gender relations and the role of media. If Tannen's assessment of the nature of this discussion is taken to heart, what is needed first and foremost in communicating cross-culturally is commonality of language. To begin establishing this commonality, I will first clarify my use of the word *equality*. By this, I am referring to the human rights principle of *substantive equality* (equality of results) established by the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), described in further detail by Facio and Morgan (2009, p. 2). Also, for the purpose of clarifying the foundational objective of this paper, I will offer the reader some insight into my decision to use the words *patriarchy* and *patriarchal* rather than *tradition* or *traditional* in my analysis of gender roles and gendered behavior. This choice was guided by my growing familiarity with the work of radical feminist writer bell hooks, whose assessment of the power dynamics at play in patriarchal structures is deeply relevant to this study.

Indeed, hooks (2004) addresses the difference between these two language choices quite directly, critiquing the work of numerous writers who explore the crisis of masculinity experienced by boys and men through the more socially palatable descriptor of *tradition*, while leaving the structural influence of patriarchal values largely unexamined (p. 36-41). Interestingly, hooks discusses this trend most thoroughly in the work of writers she admires. In her final example, the work of therapist Terrence Real, she is more explicit about why his language choice is problematic: "Again, Real uses the word 'traditional' rather than 'patriarchal.' Yet traditions are rarely hard to change. What has been all but impossible to change is widespread cultural patriarchal propaganda" (p. 41).

At this point, the question that may naturally arise is how this discussion becomes relevant to a study of female linguistic behavior. What is significant in the above critique is that, not only does patriarchal structure go deeper than tradition, it is primarily concerned with ways of maintaining power over others. Thus, in essence, the possession of patriarchal power is necessarily dependent upon disempowerment of others. As hooks (2000) puts it, "[t]he privilege of power is at the heart of patriarchal thinking," and she describes a pattern of power struggle in which love cannot flourish, in which males and females in relationship are more concerned with being "powerful, in control, on top—being right" (p. 152). It is this desire for control that comes to the forefront of relational behavior when these power dynamics are at play. In her discussion, hooks goes on to characterize these dynamics in the sense of partners being forced to choose between the options of "one-up and one-down," with partners locked in a "struggle for domination" (p. 153). It is this struggle that I refer to in my use of the term *power imbalance*. The state of having power over another is necessarily dependent on the other person being in the "one-down" position, a relational dynamic in which mutual empowerment and genuine equality become impossible.

This study's findings demonstrate some ways in which language can be used to establish power in individual relationships with others. However, even when this effort is situationally successful, it remains relevant to keep in mind the broader structural dynamics of patriarchy and how this system continues to maintain women's "one-down" to men's "one-up" position in the larger structural scheme of social status and power. Within the context of heterosexual partnership, the need for women and men to act in solidarity and move away from this "dominator model" is one that hooks (2004) brings to the forefront of her cultural critique:

> We need to highlight the role women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture so that we will recognize patriarchy as a system women and men support equally, even if men receive more rewards from that system. Dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is work that men and women must do together. (p. 24)

This visionary feminist goal of solidarity and mutuality is foundational to this study. However, even as I claim this, I also offer the awareness that focusing exclusively on these dynamics within heterosexual relationships may inadvertently serve to reinforce the dominant paradigm of the gender binary and the attending notion of sex differences as being "opposite." In her study of "Sex and Gender Differences in Variation," Penelope Eckert (1989) discusses the difference between the easily-definable categories of sex and the more complex social construction of gender, pointing out the tendency of past sociolinguistic research to present sex as a pair of oppositional categories (p. 250-251). Although Eckert's study is concerned with sound change rather than word choice or attitudinal stance, suggesting different implications for that area of research, her challenge to the notion of male-female sex differences as "opposite" is an equally relevant consideration for critical discourse analysis. Specifically, she points out that "[w]henever one sees sex differences in language, there is nothing to suggest that it is not power that is at issue rather than gender per se" (p. 256). In essence, the notion of gender opposites is a paradigm that both depends on and serves to reinforce patriarchal gender stereotypes. In this context, acting to obtain power from within an oppositional relational model is arguably more likely to reinforce inequality than to eradicate it.

While both the motivations and the effects surrounding power-imbalanced discourse strategies are bound to differ depending on who is using them, in the context of intimacy, the effects are in all cases likely to be negative and to cause some degree of distress to the target. This is the primary social issue with which this study engages, using discourse analysis to examine these patterns of disrespect and distress. As Pennycook (2001, p. 798) points out, "over-emphasis on discourse" is a potential weakness of this approach, one which I will attempt to minimize through qualitative discussion of the context surrounding quantified aspects of the discourse.

In order to lay the groundwork for a proper description of the immediate context, I must first draw upon the broader context of how sitcoms characterize people according to patriarchal roles of gender and class. Sociologist Richard Butsch (2011) provides a detailed analytical overview of this media tradition in his 2005 article, "Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms About Class and Gender." In it, he paints a compelling picture of the ways that working-class men's masculinity has historically been undermined in sitcoms, through depictions which were largely dependent on their wives appearing more intelligent, competent, and socially appropriate. Together, these depictions served to reinforce the patriarchal superiority of upper and middle class men by distorting and trivializing the struggles of real working-class men. "Failing as men confirmed the appropriateness of their class status," Butsch says of these characters, "especially when compared to the middle-class TV husbands of the time" (p. 463).

What becomes particularly interesting, then, is that all three men appearing in this study are not only middle class, but arguably *upper* middle class. Each has a four-year college degree, a professional job, and an attractive home in an expensive neighborhood. Nevertheless, two out of

the three, Phil and Jeff, bear a striking resemblance to the above-described depictions of working-class men. Phil is presented as a well-meaning, emasculated bumbler who never gets around to fixing anything, and Jeff frequently appears crude, romantically hopeless, and lacking in material taste. While Butsch (2011) acknowledges that sitcom characterizations have shifted over the past few decades, he maintains that middle class male sitcom characters tend to be depicted as professionally successful, and with their masculinity intact (p. 475). This is a mold into which Phil, particularly in Season 2, does not fit. For me, the question that immediately arises is, what aspect of patriarchal structure is this devalued middle class status serving to uphold? As Mille and McIlvenny (2008) put it, "the basic social roles assigned to female and male characters by storytellers are tremendously important contributors to the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes," and "contribute to viewer expectations and beliefs about gender" (p. 201-202). This is a topic I will revisit in the discussion section.

For the purposes of this paper, I find it useful to bear in mind the assignment process for these social roles, and to maintain a sense of curiosity as to how writers, directors, and producers may use their creative and institutional power to deliver these particular characterizations. The behaviors analyzed in this study, while on the surface appearing to place the female character in a position of greater power, in fact do nothing to genuinely challenge or dismantle patriarchal male privilege, and instead serve only to compromise the quality of the relationship. I assert that such an outcome is not in any way beneficial to women. Whether or not these portrayals are of any benefit to men is a matter of perspective, as further described in the conclusions section. However, the primary concern of this paper is empowerment of women, which calls for a challenge to the manner in which they are depicted in popular media, particularly in this sample.

III. METHODOLOGY

The data described in this study are drawn from a total of six episodes from the 2010-2011 season, and were collected with the goal of determining how frequently and in what contexts power-imbalanced exchanges would occur, specifically within the primary categories of Dismissive, Condescending, and Infantilizing language used by the female characters. In order to simplify the content for the purposes of comparison through discourse analysis, the sitcoms were chosen according to the following criteria: sitcoms broadcast from open-access networks, airing an active season following a full 2010-2011 season, with ensemble casts representing at least one stable heterosexual partnership. I found just three sitcoms that matched all of these criteria: *Modern Family*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Rules of Engagement*.

As mentioned in the introduction, the quantitative portion of the study examines selected portions of the dialogue using discourse analysis, which is an applied linguistic method of studying "how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews, etc" (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985, p. 84). The selected portions of dialogue focus largely on interactions between the following characters: Phil and Claire Dunphy (*Modern Family*), Lily Aldrin and Marshall Eriksen (*How I Met Your Mother*), and Jeff and Audrey Bingham (*Rules of Engagement*). For the purpose of maintaining consistency when drawing comparisons across the entire sample, all figures in the tables presenting quantitative data consist exclusively of coded interactions from these three relationships. In examples where the surrounding context of each sitcom warrants more complex discussion, the qualitative analysis expands from this foundation of interactional coding and examines the relational dynamics from a broader perspective.

The initial step in data-gathering consisted of watching the full 2010-2011 season of each program, with the assumption that each would contain episodes representing a relational power imbalance in which the female character seems to hold greater power. When this hypothesis proved to be correct, two episodes (21-22 minutes each) were selected from each program, in which the same

two characters interacted consistently, and which contained female linguistic behavior appearing to represent power imbalance. Drawing from this sample of six episodes (Bays & Thomas, 2010a; Bays & Thomas, 2010b; Hertz & Haukom, 2010; Levitan, 2010; Wass, 2011; Wrubel, 2010), the raw data consist of self-produced transcriptions, representing verbal and non-verbal communication within each scene in which the partnered characters exchange spoken dialogue.

While I did consider searching for existing transcripts and subsequently editing for discrepancies between those texts and the actual spoken dialogue, it turned out to be much more fruitful to start from scratch, transcribe the dialogue as I initially heard it, check and refine each transcription, then cross-check any remaining ambiguities against closed captions or scripts provided online. This allowed for interaction with the spoken dialogue in a detailed way, including the occasional puzzling over what exactly was said by a character. Each of the six transcriptions represents approximately four hours of work, including three full viewings of each episode and multiple detailed viewings to check for completeness, accuracy, and the inclusion of information related to situational context that would assist in coding. Given the number of times it became necessary to go back over each interaction to make sure all the verbal and non-verbal communication was correctly and completely represented, this encouraged me to record the use of haptics (defined here as environmental or prop-related interactions that influence a characters' actions and/or another characters' reactions to them) and subtleties in non-verbal communication that likely would have been overlooked in fewer or more passive viewings.

In keeping with this experience of being immersed in the content and to some degree reaching an "interpretive rendering from the inside" (Charmaz, 2004, p. 980), the gradually unfolding process for gathering and interpreting this data evolved through the tenets of grounded theory as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Additionally, it addressed the need for balance between naturalistic inquiry and trustworthiness criteria (Guba, 1981, p. 79) by defining some aspects of the research objectives and methods ahead of time (the three primary categories and the goals of establishing both their frequency and context), and allowing others to emerge through active engagement with the data. Apart from the aspects described ahead of time, the research question was continually refined during the course of data gathering, and expanded to match what was actually in the sample rather than what was expected. The coding system was developed as an outgrowth of prior undergraduate work in discourse analysis, with the particulars of code generation, data reduction, and data organization primarily informed by guidance from faculty mentors and by Miles & Huberman (1984, p. 58-70). After the main coding categories were derived from the three primary behavior types presented in the initial research question (Dismissive, Condescending, and Infantilizing), each subsequent element of the coding system presented in Table 1 was drawn from the preliminary findings. The initial step in preparing this coding system consisted of transcribing a single episode from each sitcom, according to the above-described process.

After the initial data was collected and a foundational outline of dialogue coding categories was created (see Table 1), I produced the remaining transcripts and used these data to inform the final changes to the dialogue coding system (see Appendix A). In order to ensure the creation of sufficient categories for coding, I created several drafts of the coding schema, consulting my mentors at various steps for guidance on how to establish complete, fully operationalized definitions and how to properly address trustworthiness criteria. In order to establish face validity, I consulted three experienced linguistic professionals in the development of the final coding system, expanding my outline from the basic coding categories shown in Table 1 to the three-page system of operationalized definitions and detailed criteria shown in Appendix A.

Once the coding system was finalized, the next task was to identify which portions of the sample warranted quantitative analysis. The first step in preparing the transcripts for coding was to highlight portions of the communication by the female character that appeared to represent an attempt to gain, regain, or maintain an advantageous power position through one of the three

behaviors represented in Table 1. I used criteria consisting of three primary coding categories (Dismissive, Condescending, and Infantilizing), and each primary category contains four subcategories describing aspects of the context and manner of delivery, as described in Table 1. Each of these compound codes was assigned to items in the highlighted sample according to the detailed definitions presented in the final dialogue coding system presented in Appendix A.

In choosing the preliminary definitions presented in Table 1, the goal was to approximate the kinds of folk definitions that an average viewer might bring to her private viewing experience. Thus, the primary source became the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter referred to as OED), with primary category definitions limited to the elements of each OED definition which appeared to best represent negative interpersonal relations within an intimate partnership. Conversely, for the purpose of creating an operationalized coding system that could be used by subsequent coders, the expanded definitions found in Appendix A were drawn from the sample data itself. These specific distinctions were added with the intention of making the initial definitions more concrete and differentiating intuitive or personalized definitions (including my own) from those that could remain consistent and generalizable across the entire sample.

Table 1: Dialogue Coding Categories

DISMISSIVE

dismiss – pertinent OED definitions:

4. To deprive or disappoint *of* or *from* some advantage

6. To discard, reject: *esp.*(as Latin *dimittere*) to put away, repudiate (a wife).

(*repudiate*): 1a. To cast off, disown (a person or thing previously claimed as one's own or associated with oneself)
1b. Of a man: to divorce, dismiss, or reject (a wife or bride)

DISM-DIR	Dismissive discourse spoken directly to the target
DISM-IND1	Dismissive discourse spoken as an aside in target's presence
DISM-IND2a	Dismissive discourse spoken to a second person in target's presence
DISM-IND2b	Dismissive discourse spoken to a second person in target's absence

CONDESCENDING

condescend (OED):

I. To come down voluntarily.

1. To come down, go down, descend.
2. To come or bend down, so far as a particular action is concerned, from one's position of dignity or pride; to stoop voluntarily and graciously; to deign:
   a. *to do* something.
   b. *to* a course or action.

COND-DIR	Condescending discourse spoken directly to the target
COND-IND1	Condescending discourse spoken as an aside in target's presence
COND-IND2a	Condescending discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's presence
COND-IND2b	Condescending discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's absence

INFANTILIZING

infantilize (OED):

trans. To treat (a person) inappropriately or condescendingly like an infant or young child; *spec*. to encourage infantile behaviour in (a person) by doing this.

INF-DIR	Infantilizing discourse spoken directly to the target
INF-IND1	Infantilizing discourse spoken as an aside in target's presence
INF-IND2a	Infantilizing discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's presence
INF-IND2b	Infantilizing discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's absence

Expanding on the above categories, the further-specified definitions in Appendix A were designed to enable a second coder to code some of my data. In fact, I had originally planned to have a second coder code at least ten percent of the sample data so that I could assess the reliability of the coding system. However, upon comparing the results of this co-coded subsample (which was attempted after only a short training and practice session), there were some inconsistencies between coders. It was clear that extensive coder training and greater familiarity with the coding criteria would be necessary for increased reliability. Since the amount of time required was beyond the scope of this study, I ultimately decided to forgo the intercoder reliability check. However, this is an important area for future work, so I have included the initial results and a discussion of them in Appendix B. Despite the discrepancies discussed there, my own coding was based on a detailed familiarity with the episodes and context that was inaccessible to the second coder. Additionally, my repeated coding of the data was instructive in the sense that it allowed me to continually evaluate the differences between my intuitive notions about the category terms and the actual criteria that had evolved from the episodes themselves. This repeated process of careful comparison provided some insight to the interpretive challenges potentially experienced by the co-coder, and enabled me to maintain consistency within my own coding.

Given the variety of opinions across and within disciplines in which discourse analysis is practiced, there appears to be no definitive answer as to when coding is appropriate and useful, and when it merely turns human interactions into numerical abstractions. As pointed out by Mille & McIlvenny (2000), academics in both the fields of sociolinguistics and gender studies "have increasingly argued the importance of context, of situated interactions over abstractions; they have demonstrated the need for multidimensional and dynamic instead of unidimensional and unidirectional analyses" (p. 2). With that in mind, this paper presents the coding results largely as a starting point for the qualitative discussion, inviting the reader to use them not only as a referent for understanding behavioral occurrences across the entire sample, but also as a representation of the perspectives and approach utilized by the researcher in the qualitative discussion.

IV. FINDINGS

As shown in Table 2, the results across the entire sample showed the greatest number of items in the Condescending category, followed by Dismissive and then Infantilizing. The favored delivery method was Direct (spoken directly to target), followed by Indirect 1 (spoken as an aside in target's presence).

Table 2: Occurrence of power-imbalanced behaviors across sample

(Percentages rounded to nearest whole percentage point.)

By type:		
Total behaviors	**109**	
Dismissive	46	(42%)
Condescending	59	(54%)
Infantilizing	4	(4%)
By delivery:		
Total behaviors	**109**	
-Direct	92	(84%)
-Indirect 1	13	(12%)
-Indirect 2a	1	(1%)
-Indirect 2b	3	(3%)

Table 3: Distribution of delivery type within behavior category

(Percentages rounded to nearest whole percentage point.)

Total behaviors	**109**	% of	**% of**
Dismissive	46	category	**total**
-Direct	36	78%	**33%**
-Indirect 1	9	20%	**8%**
-Indirect 2a	1	2%	**1%**
-Indirect 2b	0	0	**0**
Condescending	59		
-Direct	53	90%	**49%**
-Indirect 1	4	7%	**4%**
-Indirect 2a	0	0	**0**
-Indirect 2b	2	3%	**2%**
Infantilizing	4		
-Direct	3	75%	**3%**
-Indirect 1	0	0	**0**
-Indirect 2a	0	0	**0**
-Indirect 2b	1	25%	**1%**

When comparing the sitcoms to each other (see Tables 4 and 5), the category ranking is the same, but there was quite a disparity between characters in terms of frequency. Audrey from *Rules of Engagement* ranks highest by a considerable margin, contributing 51% of the items in the entire data sample. *Modern Family*'s Claire comes in second with 35%, and Lily from *How I Met Your Mother* ranks last, with only 14%. Given that each of the episodes differs in running time by less than one minute, this is a rather remarkable difference. In more specific terms, Audrey engages most frequently in Condescending behavior, closely followed by Dismissive, and occasionally engages in Infantilizing behavior. Claire also employs Condescending behavior most often, but Dismissive follows by a wider margin, and Infantilizing behavior is last but constitutes a slightly higher percentage of her overall behavior than it does for Audrey. Lily also employs Condescending behavior most often, followed by Dismissive, but does not engage in any Infantilizing behavior.

Table 4: Occurrences within primary behavior categories by sitcom

(Percentages rounded to nearest whole percentage point.)

Total behaviors:	**109**	
Rules of Engagement:	**56 (51%)**	Distinct features
Dismissive	25 (45%)	- disowning
Condescending	29 (52%)	- sexual rejection
Infantilizing	2 (4%)	- IND2b appears
Modern Family:	**38 (35%)**	
Dismissive	15 (39%)	- no sexual rejection
Condescending	21 (55%)	in sample
Infantilizing	2 (5%)	- no IND2 in sample
How I Met Your Mother:	**15 (14%)**	
Dismissive	6 (40%)	- sexual rejection
Condescending	9 (60%)	- no IND2 in sample
Infantilizing	0	- no INF in sample

Table 5: Occurrences within primary behavior categories by sitcom and delivery type

Behavior Category & Delivery Type	*Rules of Engagement*		*Modern Family*		*How I Met Your Mother*	
Total behaviors		**56**		**38**		**15**
Dismissive		25 (45%)		15 (39%)		6 (40%)
-Direct	(8, 9)	17	(9, 4)	13	(4, 2)	6
-Indirect 1	(3, 4)	7	(1, 1)	2		0
-Indirect 2a	(1, 0)	1		0		0
-Indirect 2b		0		0		0
Condescending		29 (52%)		21 (55%)		9 (60%)
-Direct	(8, 19)	27	(9, 8)	17	(6, 3)	9
-Indirect 1		0	(2, 2)	4		0
-Indirect 2a		0		0		0
-Indirect 2b	(0, 2)	2		0		0
Infantilizing		2 (4%)		2 (5%)		0 (0)
-Direct	(1, 0)	1	(0, 2)	2		0
-Indirect 1		0		0		0
-Indirect 2a		0		0		0
-Indirect 2b	(0, 1)	1		0		0

(Percentages rounded to nearest whole percentage point. Numerals separated by commas inside parentheses represent the number of items found for that sitcom in the first and second episodes in the sample.)

Table 5 shows the breakdown of specific behaviors and the manner of delivery within each sitcom. As shown here and also in Table 3, Direct delivery is strongly preferred, followed in almost all cases by Indirect 1 (spoken as an aside in target's presence). The rather marked exception to this pattern is an exchange between Audrey and her co-workers in *Rules of Engagement*, so different from the other items in the sample that at first I overlooked it. It constitutes a particularly interesting portion of these results, containing the only three occurrences of the Indirect 2b (spoken to a third party in target's absence) manner of delivery, as well as the only instance of indirect Infantilizing.

V. DISCUSSION

Taking a closer look at some specifics, it becomes relevant once again to revisit the underlying beliefs about power that seem foundational to the presentation of these behaviors as normative. In the conclusion of the study by Glick et al. (2004), the authors state,

> these attitudes hold little promise for greater equality so long as the basis for hostility toward men is the belief that they will inevitably and naturally retain greater status and power and the basis for benevolence toward women is paternalistic solicitude toward the supposedly weaker sex. (p. 727)

When examining a scene between Phil and Claire Dunphy of *Modern Family* in the episode titled, "Unplugged," these assumptions about power become especially salient. The scene opens as follows:

> (Claire brings a plate of pancakes from the kitchen to the table, where the rest of the Dunphy family is seated, awaiting the food.)

Claire: 'K… (puts a pancake on Hailey's plate). Here you go...

(All other family members are seated at the table, using electronic gadgets.)

Claire: Guys, breakfast. Guys? (No response) Phil. (Smacks Phil on the forehead with open hand.) Hello.

Phil: (gradually looking up from his laptop) To-otally with you. Kids, put your dishes in the dishwasher.

Claire: OK, no. That's it. Everybody, gadgets down, now!

Hailey: Why are you freaking out?

Claire: Because you're all so involved with your little gizmos, nobody is even talking. Families are supposed to talk.

(Turns to Phil) And what are you doing that's so important?

(Levitan, 2010)

In the non-verbal portion of her first exchange with Phil (coded as INF-DIR—Infantilizing, issued Directly to target), Claire smacks Phil on the forehead with an open hand to get his attention. She then proceeds to issue a directive to the entire family, ascribing a status to Phil that is equal to that of the children, who are also sitting at the breakfast table. This status is made explicit when she asks him, "And what are you doing that's so important?" She seems to be implying that his behavior is inappropriate and subject to interrogation—more specifically, that he must answer to her in defense of it.

There are several assumptions about power underlying this exchange, the most obvious one involving notions of physical power. The assumption here is that Claire's physical strength, at least in comparison to Phil's, is insufficient to cause him significant physical pain. However, if the roles were reversed, and Phil were to strike Claire in a similar manner, this behavior would seem highly inappropriate and unacceptable, regardless of her reaction. In the context of the above-referenced conclusion by Glick et al. (2004), what at first glance appears to be a power play by Claire (ostensibly a harmless one, given Phil's lack of pain reaction) is in fact merely a reinforcement of the patriarchal notion of the "weaker sex." If, on the other hand, the physical strike had elicited a visible pain response from Phil, this behavior would directly challenge gender-based notions of physical power, and, in so doing, would likely appear more inappropriate (as well as disconcerting) to the viewer. In this sense, it is the very contextual element that appears to depict Claire as being in control that in fact underscores her presumed lack of physical power.

The patriarchal notions embedded in the verbal elements of this exchange are more subtle. In addressing Phil within a group directive that also includes the children—"That's it. Everybody, gadgets down, now!"—Claire engages in Infantilizing behavior, apparently relegating Phil's familial status to that of a child. The presentation of this behavior as normative and inoffensive depends on the viewer's assumption that Claire (as a stay-at-home mom) is powerless to undermine the primary source of Phil's patriarchal power, which is his role as the family breadwinner. However, if Phil were to issue the same directive to Claire, this behavior would suddenly seem harsh and inappropriately parental, due to the imbalance of economic and social (read, *structural*) power.

This notion of a double-standard can be similarly applied to Claire's final question, "And what are you doing that's so important?" Were Phil to address Claire with the same question, the implied

subordination would stand out in stark relief because of his access to male privilege, both in terms of structural social power and his more direct power over Claire's financial well-being. This reversal, in turn, calls into question what is being accomplished by Claire's attempt to dominate Phil through language, and whether or not the power she seems to establish over him in the moment is real or illusory.

This brings us back to Butsch's (2011) description of working-class distortions presented through sitcoms in order to reinforce class privilege. In the scope of the above-described situation, I begin to wonder what aspect of patriarchal structure Phil's devalued upper middle class status is serving to uphold, and can only conclude that its job is to covertly perpetuate gender inequality by obscuring male privilege. The image it seems to present is that upper middle class White women have achieved a level of social power that is equal to or even greater than that of their husbands, even in families in which the division of labor is so clearly delineated by gender. Yet, closer examination exposes this as an illusion. As Eckert (1989) points out, "[w]hen social scientists say that women are more status conscious than men… they are stumbling on the fact that, deprived of power, women must satisfy themselves with status" (p. 256). However diminished Phil may appear to be in direct interaction with Claire, the institutional privileges that give him greater social status and power under patriarchy remain unchanged. Claire's effort to diminish his status in the immediate situation has an effect that, however successful, is limited to the family unit and does nothing to equalize the broader structural imbalance of material and social power. All that has shifted is the expectation that the viewing audience will condone Claire's controlling behavior, accepting these temporary gains in status as a reasonable substitute for genuine empowerment.

Nevertheless, observing Phil's lack of assertiveness and confidence over the course of the season raises the question of possible consequences to the relationship. Considering that Claire's depicted status as the smarter and more competent spouse necessarily depends on Phil's depiction as a bumbling dad might prompt one to question how this relationship could possibly be construed to represent gender equality. At the same time, there are a great many indications that Claire loves and values Phil, such as hand-holding, kissing, expressing empathy, and offering comfort. Also, especially in comparison with the sample episodes from the other two sitcoms, a noteworthy element of this relationship is the complete absence of sexual rejection within the sample.

In *Rules of Engagement*, a casual viewing of the sample episodes offers a superficial impression of egalitarianism, due in large part to the glib one-liners that the principal characters frequently exchange. However, the dynamic of these exchanges is generally oppositional, and is largely based on gendered stereotypes. Audrey's character reflects notions of women as being impulsive, indecisive, and irrational, while Jeff's version of maleness is characterized as boorish, sex-obsessed, and insensitive. More importantly with regard to the discourse, Jeff rarely gets the last word and is frequently the target of ridicule and rejection. However, many of the ways in which Audrey appears to be exerting greater power in the relationship are in fact based on a subtly-embedded yet deeply disempowering subtext, which suggests that women cannot expect to be satisfied and fulfilled in a typical marriage. Consequently, her situational power over Jeff is maintained through the destructive and ever-present threat of her eventually becoming dissatisfied enough to leave him.

In the episode "Handy Man," Audrey engages in disowning language within the first few minutes ("…just do it cause I asked you to, and I'm your wife—for now"). This behavioral choice is one I would naturally expect to see challenged if Jeff had expressed a similar sentiment toward Audrey, for reasons similar to the above-described power imbalance between Phil and Claire. Instead, Jeff expresses interest in sex, which Audrey declines due to her plans to go out with a group of female friends. However, instead of expressing her disinterest respectfully, she ridicules him—first for expressing interest in sex at an inopportune time, and then for his way of expressing it:

Audrey: (laughs) Great read on the situation, honey. (Pats him on the chest.) I gotta go.

Jeff: Augh… come on, you said you didn't even want to go to this thing, stay home. We'll go a few rounds.

Audrey: Oh, Mr. Shakespeare. You and your love sonnets.

Jeff: It's part your fault for getting all dolled up and looking so hot.

Audrey: (Tone softens) Mm… that was really sweet.

Jeff: (smiles) Not as sweet as—

Audrey: (Tone rises) No, no, let-lemme leave on that one.
(Exits, goes down in the elevator, stumbles on the way into the lobby.)

(Hertz & Haukom, 2010)

When Audrey returns a few minutes later due to a broken shoe, she in turn expresses interest in sex, which Jeff declines, admitting that he has masturbated during the few minutes she was out. Audrey responds in the following manner, again expressing disapproval of Jeff's behavior:

Audrey: (smiling) Seriously?

Jeff: Yeah.

Audrey: (laughing slightly) In the time it took me to take the elevator to the lobby and back?

Jeff: Yeah.

Audrey: That was maybe three minutes.

(Hertz & Haukom, 2010)

A noteworthy element of this scene is the fact that Jeff's reason for declining sex is challenged and scrutinized, while Audrey's is not. The initial impression might be that Audrey has the right to expect sexual gratification when she initiates sex, but Jeff does not. However, a closer look at the overall context of this episode yields a somewhat different picture.

While on the surface Audrey may seem to have greater power in this scene, the sexual frustration thread that continues throughout the episode is seemingly based on a two-part assumption: first, that a married woman is dependent upon her husband for pleasure, and, secondly, that once he has satisfied his own immediate sexual needs, he will be either unable or unwilling to satisfy hers. In this catch-22 scenario, the logical conclusion is that Audrey can expect to go unsatisfied much of the time, which is exactly what happens in this episode. However, instead of being assertive and asking for her needs to be met, in the moment Audrey expresses only disapproval and bewilderment, then later issues an Infantilizing comment to a co-worker in Jeff's absence, commenting that she ought to give him "sandpaper mittens" (Hertz & Haukom, 2010), the implication being that they would serve as punishment for (or perhaps prevention of) masturbation. The remaining exchanges between Audrey and Jeff revolve around mismatches in

timing or interest, in which Jeff gets sexual gratification and Audrey is deprived of it—even after they finally manage to engage in mutual sex.

When Jeff acknowledges that the long-awaited encounter was over "a little… quicker .. than maybe I would have liked, or .. perhaps .. *you* would have liked," Audrey initially denies her lack of satisfaction: "Come on, Jeff, it was great." When Jeff presses the issue, offering to "take [Audrey] for another spin," she laughs slightly, then indicates that she has already pleasured herself to make up for the unsatisfying sexual encounter (Hertz & Haukom, 2010). While this could be interpreted as an indication that Audrey is finally asserting her power, that interpretation seems questionable in context. Audrey's manner of delivery (in communicating the fact that she has masturbated) closely mimics Jeff's earlier manner of expressing the same message, which seems to give her version a vengeful spin. In this light, her choice to masturbate could appear to be less about her own pleasure than about proving a point to Jeff. Either way, the resulting impression still reinforces the message that Audrey cannot reasonably expect a mutually fulfilling sexual encounter with her husband. Past this point, any effort to determine the relationship between this message and Audrey's repeated sexual rejection of Jeff becomes something of a chicken-egg question, which could be fully explored only in a thorough study of all seasons of this show.

In *How I Met Your Mother*, Lily engages in power-imbalanced behaviors far less frequently than Audrey does, but sexual dynamics and rejection still play a prominent role. Despite the relatively small number of highlighted behaviors, with only a minority of those being assigned specifically to the Dismissive category based on overt sexual rejection, many of these behaviors involve Lily issuing criticism of Marshall, relating either to sexual need or sexual expression. In one such example, when Marshall is expressing the difficulty of going without sex or masturbation for two weeks, Lily replies, "I have read .. eleven books on conception. I .. have cut out alcohol, caffeine, and sugar…. but .. [gestures outward with hands] good for you for not playing with yourself!" (Bays & Thomas, 2010b). Several others occur within scenes in which Marshall's sexual gratification is being somehow denied or delayed, as illustrated in the following exchange, in which Lily uses sexual manipulation in an effort to get Marshall to establish better boundaries with his father and maintain privacy around their attempts to conceive a child.

> Lily: So, call him [Marshall's father] and tell him we decided not to have a baby.
>
> Marshall: (Eyes wide, exhaling in abrupt wheezing laughter) Ho-hoho… Okay, so you just… You want me to give my dad a stroke?
>
> Lily: (Mimicking Marshall's laugh) Ho-ho .. ho—Only if you want to give *this* (gesturing toward her body) a stroke!
>
> (Bays & Thomas, 2010b)

In another instance, a peripheral detail of Marshall's sexual expression is criticized: "Oh, baby. No, no .. not the slipper socks with the rubber soles! I work so hard to-to set the mood, a-and when I see those, I feel the egg go (makes slurping sound)… right back up my Fallopian tube" (Bays & Thomas, 2010a).

Again, on the surface, these behaviors might appear to be an expression of greater power on Lily's part, at least until one considers a possible assumption contained within these behavioral choices. For instance, Marshall's reaction to Lily's cleavage moments after the "stroke" comment suggests the notion that her body holds a great deal of power over his desire: "Aughh! I can't think straight! .. Why do you have to wear that shirt?" (Bays & Thomas, 2010b). Thus, the situational influence of this assumed power is clear; however, the frequency with which Lily attempts to exert this power in the broader context of the season would suggest that sexual attractiveness is her

primary source of power. More to the point, this constitutes an indirect and relatively fragile form of power, as it is necessarily dependent on Marshall's response. This dependence places Lily in a position that is camouflaged as dominating, yet is actually still subordinate.

What becomes most salient about this is that, in terms of Lily's needs and desires being met, Marshall does not seem any more responsive to these manipulative behaviors than he is to simple requests. In fact, he often intuits her needs and perspectives. Within the above-described episode, Marshall comes to the conclusion on his own that his father may be too "enthusiastic" about the details of other people's lives (Bays & Thomas, 2010b). Within this sample, there does not appear to be any reward for Lily's sexual rejection of Marshall, which highlights the possibility that her behavior is merely a reflection of ambivalent stereotypes about female sexual power. Indeed, after Marshall's epiphany, without any assurance that he will do what she has asked, Lily takes Marshall's hand and leads him upstairs toward their apartment, suggesting that they will have sex after all. Here, as in most of the other scenarios in which conflict arises between Marshall and Lily, the problem is resolved within a single episode rather than being part of an ongoing thread of tension within the relationship, in contrast to the other two sitcoms.

In considering the gendered stereotypes that appear to be reflected in these examples, the element of authorship and gender representation within production teams naturally comes up. Although past studies have been unable to track a strong correlation between female decision-makers in television and the ways in which women are portrayed, some connection between the presence of female executive producers and "powerful language" used by women has been suggested (Scharrer, 2001, p. 25). While this study does focus on female language use and notions of power, the way in which the language was analyzed does not allow for any direct comparisons with Scharrer's assertion. However, when considering the relative presence or absence of power-imbalanced behaviors, an interesting picture emerges. The credits for both *Rules of Engagement* and *Modern Family* list exclusively male directors, primary writers, and executive producers. By contrast, the two episodes from *How I Met Your Mother*, although written by a male team, have a female director, who is also one of the executive producers. While this sample is far too narrow to warrant any broader generalizations about the greater population of sitcoms, both presence and ascending power position of female production team members appear to have a negative correlation with the frequency of power-imbalanced female behavior in the sample episodes.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

While both the introduction and discussion of this paper have examined in detail the detriment to women constituted by the promotion of these behaviors, a question still remains: What's in it for the guys? In terms of serving the personal needs and desires of the husbands depicted in these episodes, the answer appears to be, *nothing*. Neither the needs of women nor men are being met or even mediated by these behaviors. The sole benefit produced by these behaviors appears to be ideological, which merely points out the fallacy of the ideology in question. These behaviors, which both depend on and reinforce patriarchal stereotypes, serve only to maintain the power imbalance that supports male privilege, rather than increasing female power and encouraging egalitarian relationships.

In pursuit of answers to these questions, I found the approach of grounded theory to be highly effective in determining the best way to interact with the data. It enabled me to create a coding system that was appropriate to the actual content of the episodes, creating a strong quantitative foundation to support a structured and meaningful qualitative analysis. The subtle messages embedded in these sample episodes suggest a pattern of relational imprinting that warrants deeper examination in future language research. Despite the narrow scope of this particular study, its contribution to the broader conversation around gender and language is perhaps best measured by

how its findings suggest possible directions for future researchers who are concerned with using applied linguistics in mediating social problems, as well as by the way it has galvanized my commitment to those common goals.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As previously mentioned, by virtue of its time and funding constraints, the scope of this research project is quite narrow. Specifically, it is limited to six American sitcom episodes, to three heterosexual relationships, and to female behavior. Additionally, my own inexperience as a researcher is in many ways a limitation; however, the experience gained over the course of this project has provided invaluable insight into improving the design and scope of future research endeavors, and additionally demonstrated the need for similar research to continue.

The potential choices for future expansion of this study could go in several directions, including reality television and commercials. If further inquiry into the quantitative analysis is desired, I feel that the most efficient way to build on this research in the immediate future would be to refine and build upon the existing database with further analysis and comparison with an additional sample, which could be accomplished with a modest amount of time and additional funding. In the first phase, I would propose revisiting the initial data sample to improve intercoder reliability, then performing a similar analysis of male characters' behavior within the same sample. As in this study, an analysis based on grounded theory would necessitate the data itself dictating the specific coding categories for male behavior. However, as a first step toward a compelling comparison with this study, I feel it would be useful to initially code the male behavior with the same coding system used to analyze the female behavior. After this initial comparison was complete, a new coding system would be created from the male behavior, and ultimately applied to the female behavior as well to complete both sides of the comparison.

On a much broader level, once the coding process was refined, it could be valuable to assess the potential progress within media depictions of relationships by comparing this database with three of the older shows that initially prompted my interest in this topic: *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *King of Queens*, and *Malcolm in the Middle*. On the other hand, even at this level, the data sample would remain very limited in terms of racial and cultural representation, as the vast majority of characters in all six of the shows are White. That alone should suggest that the patriarchal underpinnings of these depictions are upholding more than just gender privilege, and prompt further research into the underrepresentation of people of color in domestic comedy. For a researcher with a strong background in ethnic studies or racial theory, comparisons between shows depicting families among varying racial strata might be more appropriate. Ultimately, I would suggest adding survey data, and possibly some personal interview data, to assess the quality of interaction viewers have with these programs, and the ways in which they do or do not identify with these on-screen depictions of relational power imbalance.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the dedicated mentorship of Dr. Kimberley Brown, Ph.D., whose support and advice was essential throughout my research process. This study was additionally reviewed by Dr. Susan Conrad, Ph.D., and supported by her encouraging assistance. I also acknowledge the assistance of Dr. John Hellermann, Ph.D., Dr. Roberta Hunte, Ph.D., and Sara Van Dan Acker, M.A., with great appreciation. I offer special thanks to the McNair Program coordinators, Dr. Jolina Kwong Caputo, Ed.D., and Dr. Toeutu Faaleava, Ph.D.

References

Bays, C., & Thomas, C. (Writers), & Fryman, P. (Director). (2010a). Architect of destruction. In C. Bays & P. Fryman (Executive Producers), *How I Met Your Mother* [Television series episode]. Los Angeles, CA: CBS Broadcasting.

Bays, C., & Thomas, C. (Writers), & Fryman, P. (Director). (2010b). Big days. In C. Bays & P. Fryman (Executive Producers), *How I Met Your Mother* [Television series episode]. Los Angeles, CA: CBS Broadcasting.

Butsch, R. (2005/2011). Five decades and three hundred sitcoms about class and gender. In T. E. Ore, (Ed.), *The social construction of difference and inequality: Race, class, gender, and sexuality* (5th ed.) (458-476). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Charmaz, K. (2004). Premises, principles, and practices in qualitative research: Revisiting the foundations. *Qualitative Health Research*, *14*, 976-993.

Condescend. (2012). In *Oxford English dictionary online*. Retrieved from http://dictionary.oed.com/

Dismiss. (2012). In *Oxford English dictionary online*. Retrieved from http://dictionary.oed.com/

Eckert, P. (1989). The whole woman: Sex and gender differences in variation. *Language Variation and Change*, *1*(1989), 245-267.

Facio, A., & Morgan, M. I. (2009). Equity or equality for women?: Understanding CEDAW's equality principles. *IWRAW Asia Pacific Occasional Papers Series* (14).

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Glick, P., Lameiras, M., Fiske, S. T., Eckes, T., Masser, B., Volpato, C., Manganelli, A. M., Pek, J. C. X., Huang, L., Sakallı-Uğurlu, N., Rodríguez Castro, Y., D'Avila Pereira, M. L., Willemsen, T. M., Brunner, A., Six-Materna, I., Wells, R. (2004). Bad but bold: Ambivalent attitudes toward men predict gender inequality in 16 nations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 86*(5): 713–728.

Guba, E. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *ECTJ, 29*(2): 75-91.

Hertz, T., & Haukom, M. (Writers), & Wass, T. (Director). (2010). Handy man [Television series episode]. In T. Hertz, D. Robinson, J. Giarraputo, M. Sikowitz, & B. Wernick (Executive Producers), *Rules of engagement.* Culver City, CA: CBS Broadcasting.

hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Infantilize. (2012). In *Oxford English dictionary online*. Retrieved from http://dictionary.oed.com/

Lauzen, M. M., Dozier, D. M., & Horan, N. (2008). Constructing gender stereotypes through social roles in prime-time television. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 52*(2): 200-214.

Levitan, S. (Writer), & Spiller, M. (Director). (2010). Unplugged [Television series episode]. In S. Levitan & C. Lloyd (Executive Producers), *Modern Family*. Los Angeles, CA: ABC Broadcasting.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Mille, K. W., & McIlvenny, P. (2000). Gender and spoken interaction: A survey of feminist theories and sociolinguistic research in the United States and Britain [translated into Finnish]. In Sajavaara, Kari & Piirainen-Marsh, Arja (Eds.), *Kieli, Diskurssi & Yhteisö* [Language, Discourse and Community], Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Press, 257-297.

Miller, J. B., MD. (2008). Telling the truth about power. *Women & Therapy, 31*(2-4): 145-161.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Repudiate. (2012). In *Oxford English dictionary online*. Retrieved from http://dictionary.oed.com/

Richards, J., Platt, J., and Weber, H. (1985). *Longman dictionary of applied linguistics.* London: Longman Group Limited.

Saft, S., & Ohara, Y. (2009). Men's adultery as sickness: Metaphor, gender categories and the discursive construction of gender differences on Japanese television consultation programs. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *6*(3): 113-147.

Scharrer, E. (2001). From wise to foolish: The portrayal of the sitcom father, 1950s-1990s. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 45*(1):23-40.

Tannen, D. (1994). *Gender and discourse.* New York, NY: Oxford.

Van Dijk, T. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In Schiffrin, D., Tannen D., and Hamilton, H.E. (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (352-371). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Wass, T. (Writer), & Wernick, B. (Director). (2011). Rug-of-war. In T. Hertz, D. Robinson, J. Giarraputo, & A. Ackerman (Executive Producers), *Rules of Engagement*. Culver City, CA: CBS Broadcasting.

Wrubel, B. (Writer), & Spiller, M (Director). (2010). The old wagon [Television series episode]. In S. Levitan & C. Lloyd. (Executive Producers), *Modern Family*. Los Angeles, CA: ABC Broadcasting.

Appendix A

Dialogue Coding System

Category 1: DISMISSIVE

dismiss (v.) – pertinent OED definitions:
4. To deprive or disappoint *of* or *from* some advantage
6. To discard, reject: *esp.*(as Latin *dimittere*) to put away, repudiate (a wife).
("Dismiss," 2012)

-*repudiate (v.)*:1a. To cast off, disown (a person or thing previously claimed as one's own or associated with oneself)
1b. Of a man: to divorce, dismiss, or reject (a wife or bride)
("Repudiate," 2012)

Operationalized Definition:

Any language which appears to express any **or** all of the following intentions on the part of the speaker:

- *expressing disinterest* in the target's opinions, questions, needs, or desires (target's desires may be for certain experiences, behaviors, or things)
- *ignoring* the target's opinions, questions, needs, or desires
- *sexual rejection* of the target by the speaker
- *disowning* of the target as spouse in the moment of the utterance
- *replacing* the target's suggestions, opinions, or desires with those of the speaker without negotiating this exchange of power

(**All 3 categories** may include the following characteristics)

- intention indicated by either verbal or nonverbal aspects of communication
- any change in or combination of word choice, enunciation, pitch, tone, or nonverbal communication that is distinct from the speaker's normal communication, or changes the meaning of the language used
- a directly observable contrast between what the speaker says and what the speaker illustrates non-verbally

Codes in this category:

DISM-DIR Dismissive discourse spoken directly to the target
DISM-IND1 Dismissive discourse spoken as an aside in target's presence
DISM-IND2a Dismissive discourse spoken to a second person in target's presence
DISM-IND2b Dismissive discourse spoken to a second person in target's absence

Appendix A (cont.)

Category 2: CONDESCENDING

condescend (v.) – pertinent OED definitions:

I. To come down voluntarily.

1. To come down, go down, descend.
2. To come or bend down, so far as a particular action is concerned, from one's position of dignity or pride; to stoop voluntarily and graciously; to deign:
   c. *to do* something.
   d. *to* a course or action. ("Condescend," 2012)

Operationalized Definition:

Any language which appears to express any **or** all of the following intentions on the part of the speaker:

- directly or indirectly *ascribing a status* to the target as lower than that of the speaker
- *criticizing the target* in terms of immediate behavior, habitual behavior, appearance, or speech, with the implication that it is inferior to that of the speaker
- any condescending behavior which demonstrates power imbalance that *normally occurs between two adults*

(**All 3 categories** may include the following characteristics)

- intention indicated by either verbal or nonverbal aspects of communication
- any change in or combination of word choice, enunciation, pitch, tone, or nonverbal communication that is distinct from the speaker's normal communication, or changes the meaning of the language used
- a directly observable contrast between what the speaker says and what the speaker illustrates non-verbally

Codes in this category:

COND-DIR Condescending discourse spoken directly to the target
COND-IND1 Condescending discourse spoken as an aside in target's presence
COND-IND2a Condescending discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's presence
COND-IND2b Condescending discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's absence

Appendix A (cont.)

Category 3: INFANTILIZING

infantilize(v.) – pertinent OED definitions:

trans. To treat (a person) inappropriately or condescendingly like an infant or young child; *spec*. to encourage infantile behaviour in (a person) by doing this. ("Infantilize," 2012)

Operationalized Definition:

Any language which appears to express any **or** all of the following intentions on the part of the speaker:

- directly or indirectly *ascribing a status* to the target as lower than that of the speaker
- *criticizing the target*'s immediate behavior, habitual behavior, appearance, or speech, with the implication that it is inferior to that of the speaker
- any condescending behavior which demonstrates only those types of power imbalance that *would normally occur between an adult and a child*
- encouragement of the target to behave like a child, or to embrace, submit to, or allow the experience of *relating to the speaker as if the target were a child*

(**All 3 categories** may include the following characteristics)

- intention indicated by either verbal or nonverbal aspects of communication
- any change in or combination of word choice, enunciation, pitch, tone, or nonverbal communication that is distinct from the speaker's normal communication, or changes the meaning of the language used
- a directly observable contrast between what the speaker says and what the speaker illustrates non-verbally

Codes in this category:

INF-DIR Infantilizing discourse spoken directly to the target
INF-IND1 Infantilizing discourse spoken as an aside in target's presence
INF-IND2a Infantilizing discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's presence
INF-IND2b Infantilizing discourse spoken to a second person or group in target's absence

Appendix B

Preliminary Intercoder Reliability Discussion

As mentioned in the Methodology section, Tables 6 and 7 represent a remarkable disparity between the primary and second coders' application of the coding system. Thus, my effort to establish reliability through the inclusion of a second coder was unsuccessful. However, while there is little agreement across primary behavior categories, there is a high level of agreement across subcategories. In fact, only one item was subcategorized by the second coder under a different manner of delivery, and given the strict definitions of those subcategories, it appears to be a simple error. Additionally, all of the second coder's comments were related to rationale in choosing a certain category, or referred to ambiguity in interpretation of specific items. None of the coded items was argued as being anything other than an attempt to gain or maintain power, despite disagreement about the best single-word label for each behavior. This in itself is intriguing, and suggests that, while quantitative data may useful in identifying patterns when subjected to more rigorous tests of reliability, the inclusion of qualitative analysis is essential to understanding the power dynamics in this particular sample.

Table 6: Intercoder results for "Handy Man" episode, by category

(Percentages rounded to nearest whole percentage point.)

	Coder 1	Coder 2
Total behaviors coded:	**32**	**32**
Dismissive	13 (41%)	14 (44%)
Direct	9	11
Indirect 1	4	3
Indirect 2a	0	0
Indirect 2b	0	0
Condescending	19 (59%)	12 (38%)
Direct	19	12
Indirect 1	0	0
Indirect 2a	0	0
Indirect 2b	0	0
Infantilizing	0 (0)	6 (19%)
Direct	0	6
Indirect 1	0	1
Indirect 2a	0	0
Indirect 2b	0	0

Appendix B (cont.)

Table 7: Intercoder agreement for "Handy Man" episode

	Items by Coder 1	Items coded identically	Agreement
Total:	32	18	**56%**
Dismissive	13	9	45%
Direct	9	7	80%
Indirect 1	4	2	50%
Indirect 2a	0	0	(100%)
Indirect 2b	0	0	(100%)
Condescending	19	9	47%
Direct	19	9	47%
Indirect 1	0	0	(100%)
Indirect 2a	0	0	(100%)
Indirect 2b	0	0	(100%)
Infantilizing	0	6	0
Direct	0	6	0
Indirect 1	0	1	0
Indirect 2a	0	0	(100%)
Indirect 2b	0	0	(100%)

(Percentages rounded to nearest whole point. Items in parentheses show agreement in cases where both coders chose not to designate any items to a category.)

While there is a limit to how much generalization can be drawn from such marked disagreement between coders, it is interesting that the Infantilizing category had essentially zero agreement when it actually contained co-coded items (figures marked at 100% in parentheses merely reflect agreement where both coders chose not to categorize any items). However, the three items in this episode that I initially overlooked due to their unusual situational context are not represented here, since it was no longer possible to co-code them when the error was discovered. Thus, since the sole purpose of these tables is intercoder comparison, the three instances of Indirect 2b delivery mentioned at the end of the findings section (including one in the Infantilizing category) have been omitted here. Though agreement between coders on manner of delivery is high, as mentioned above, it is impossible to say whether or not co-coding of the missing items might have slightly improved agreement in the Infantilizing category. This category was defined with the intention of specifically limiting it to behavior dynamics that could not be categorized as resembling anything other than adult-to-child types of power imbalance. However, it would appear based on the above results that the particulars of how adult-child interaction looks and sounds may be quite different for different people.

In assessing the problems I encountered, I see some possible solutions that would be practical in a study with a broader scope and timeline. After being confronted with initially unreliable intercoder results, I would have considered the results from that first effort to be a pilot sample, and excluded them altogether. I would have subsequently retrained the coder, using sample episodes from a different sitcom to allow for a second effort at both practice coding and formal coding comparison, repeating this process as needed until the results reached an acceptable level of reliability, and refining the coding system as needed to achieve this goal.