A Mother’s Value Lies in Her Sexuality: *The Simpsons, Family Guy, and South Park* and the Preservation of Traditional Sex Roles

David Feltmate  
*Auburn University at Montgomery*

Kimberly P. Brackett  
*Auburn University at Montgomery*

*This article examines the relationship between being a sexual woman and a good mother in The Simpsons, Family Guy, and South Park. Considering the sexual criticisms of women in the “Mommy Wars” which continue to be fought across the United States, we find that these three programs reproduce conservative assumptions about women's sexuality and motherhood. Through critical constructionist theories of humor and motherhood, mothers from each program are analyzed and the relationship between their sexuality and motherliness is examined in detail. We conclude with a discussion of the social constrictions of reality that humorous popular culture both exposes and reproduces. Keywords: humor, sexuality, motherhood, social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, television*

“No! I’m not the kind of girl who makes love on a putt-putt golf course!”

Marge Simpson’s quote from *The Simpsons*’ episode “Regarding Margie,” in which she contracts amnesia and forgets her husband Homer, is a bold statement about how a dignified mother sees herself. While Marge and Homer conceived their son, Bart, inside a castle on a mini-golf course ("I Married Marge"), she has always been presented as an ideal television mother who is strained by the expectations of the mother–homemaker role; her domestic experience of living with a destructive, stupid, slob and three children; occasional desires to find meaningful employment outside the home; and being a woman with sexual needs (see, e.g., Henry 2007;
Exempting rare exception, Homer meets her sexual needs.

Marge Simpson is chief among television cartoon mothers in the new wave of adult animated sitcoms who balance being a mother with their sexual needs, a story that rarely makes it into discussions of motherhood in the real world (Hall and Bishop 2009; Nagy 2010; Plant 2010). Her claim that she is not “the kind of girl who makes love on a putt-putt golf course” implies what a good woman and good mother does. It is not the kind of statement that one could ever imagine the sexually voracious Lois Griffin of Family Guy or the “crack-whore” single mother, Liane Cartman of South Park saying. Indeed, these women form a continuum which echoes real-world criticisms of different types of mothers and on this continuum motherliness is inversely related to lasciviousness.

The Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy are among the most popular and critically received television programs in the last twenty years and the programs are widely regarded as powerful, subversive satires in the popular press. With their broad consumption and cultural influence (they are all multi-billion dollar industries that have spawned spin-offs, feature films, and careers in film and theater), it behooves us to ask how they represent major social institutions and those institutions’ constructions because their ideas and interpretations of reality will reach an audience of millions with every new episode — and have ongoing impact through syndication, digital downloads, and DVD sales. As mass media’s power resides in no small part in its ability to set agendas, the ways that entertainment products align themselves with other significant symbolic discourses in American culture makes them important participants in ongoing cultural debates. In this article, we focus specifically on the way that the institution of motherhood is represented in these three programs through the ways that motherhood roles are depicted, demonstrate their connections with ongoing arguments about the relationship between motherhood and sexuality in American culture, and theorize the significance of transmitting these ideologies through animated sitcoms.

FRAMING MOTHERHOOD

Within the sitcom’s genre confines, each of our cartoon mothers endures presumptions foisted upon mothers across America daily. How they reconcile the demands of being good women who are sexually active, mothers to their children, and homemakers shapes the ways that Marge, Lois, and Liane can act. When the expected norm is questioned a discursive space is opened within the program, allowing for critical reflection as we see characters constrained by the norms that shape the worlds they must inhabit.

While each program opens numerous critical spaces, in this article we focus on mothers and the expectations surrounding mothering behaviors, with an understanding that these depictions are “raced” in favor of white, middle-class American women. These programs draw upon traditional cultural expectations of mothers,
highlighting the script that directs mothers’ behavior, sometimes supporting the ideal and sometimes showing the inanity of the strict script. Mothering has been characterized as a narrow and limiting script (Hoffnung 1998) that harms not only women, but men and children as well. A traditional conception of motherhood conflicts with mothers as productive workers or economically independent beings and with mothers as partners in a companionate marriage. These contradictory images of motherhood inform much of the contemporary academic literature on mothers (Hall and Bishop 2009).

The specifics of what constitutes a virtuous or good mother vary historically (Thurer 1994), but there are some constant elements which are most clearly expressed in the concept of *motherhood mystique*. The *motherhood mystique* highlights traditional ideas about motherhood and builds the script for good mothering around four central tenets. First, motherhood is the path for women to achieve and fulfill the essential accomplishments of womanhood. Second, the tasks assigned to mothers—including caring for children, husband, and home—synthesize harmoniously. Third, good mothers enjoy all the mothering role’s aspects and tasks. Fourth, women should display only positive attitudes toward their mothering duties so that the children are not negatively affected (Hoffnung 1998).

The mothering mystique script, however, treats a woman’s sexual fulfillment as incompatible with the all-encompassing mother role. Sexual behavior and mothering are treated as incompatible, despite the requirement that sexual contact between male and female must occur to create a child requiring mothering. Unless she adopts her child(ren) or uses in vitro fertilization exclusively to conceive, a woman becomes a mother by first being a sexual subject. Media portrayal reinforces and recreates the motherhood mystique script, extolling the traits good mothers supposedly hold and vilifying contradicting characteristics. Alongside the recurring emphasis on good mothering, media aimed at women seem to suffer an identity crisis: pressing the domestic agenda by providing recipes for foods her family will love, while offering sexual advice that will keep her marriage interesting—especially for her husband. Ruddick (1995) suggests that mothering is framed with three core maternal demands: preservation, growth, and social acceptability. To perform mothering, one must be committed to responding to vulnerability with care, facilitating the intellectual and emotional growth of children, and conforming to the wider community’s social standards (Ruddick 1995). We will build our analysis around how Ruddick’s core maternal demands are played out within Hoffnung’s four tenets, mindful that the assumptions and roles of the script are socially constructed within this historical period.

While history demonstrates that there is no one correct way to mother, the structural level expectations of what constitutes good mothering are fairly clear. Good mothers love their children above all else. A mother’s love is viewed as the elixir that brings the loved child good mental health (Thurer 1994) and wards off the world’s material evils (Hays 1996). While mothers are reminded repeatedly of their emotional power over their children, they are encouraged to subsume their
own needs to the point that their personhood is in doubt. The *mother sacrifice* theme weaves through the academic and popular literature about mothering, resulting in guilt among mothers who, occasionally, prioritize their needs over their charges’ (Douglas and Micheals 2004).

Likewise, the emphasis on a mother’s power over her children has led to mothers being blamed if those children become less than model citizens (Almond 2010; Chodorow and Contratto 1982). This longstanding theme in criticisms of motherhood (e.g., Wylie 1942) results in parenting responsibility’s unequal distribution within the cultural script. Hays (1996) refers to the ideal of *intensive mothering* as a contradiction in North American culture that charges mothers to be the central caregivers; to devote unprecedented time, energy, and material resources; and to value mothering above paid employment. Mothering has been increasingly viewed as a fulltime profession within which good mothers would want to excel (Phoenix, Woollett, and Lloyd 1993; Warner 2005). The upshot of this is that when children are imperfect, it must have been something that she did: Was she “lascivious” and her daughter emulated her by getting pregnant at 16? A good mother would have sought guidance and information leading to successful outcomes, attempting to identify and mitigate problems before they materialize.

Mothers who fail to adopt the idealized standard find themselves at risk of being labeled “bad” or “deviant” mothers, especially if they are single. Real personal and social consequences accompany falling short, including guilt, poverty, blame, or being seen as “unfit” by those in one’s community (Green 2004; Rich 1986). Mothering’s perceived incompatibility with sexuality ultimately ties good mothering to “appropriate” sexuality—sexuality which is subsumed and defined by the mothering role.

**MOTHERING IN THE SITCOM**

Social scripts, like their theatric counterparts, are crafted so that people act accordingly. Although scripts can allow actors some flexibility, breaking character is frowned upon and punished. As we have already identified, the rewards and punishments of motherhood are built into the script. Good mothers are socially applauded, their children are proof of their success, and having good kids validates their womanhood. Bad mothers, conversely, are stigmatized and seen as failures if their children do not adhere to certain social norms. No matter what other successes the woman may have at work or play, without being a good mother she risks social pariah status.

The motherhood script is written into the sitcom genre’s “DNA.” As a commercial genre that exists in a world with 22-minute solutions and rarely any serial development, the sitcom is “a primer on managing our private lives by the systems of our new mass society” (Jones 1992:5). Sitcoms have long shown women living a domestic goddess role; June Cleaver being the paradigmatic example. With aprons and oven mitts they served love and food to their children and the husbands who have knowingly guided sitcom families for generations. Indeed, the “domesticom” or sitcom set in a domestic setting is a familiar trope and, while it saw some liberalizing tendencies
toward women’s lives in the early 1970s (e.g., *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), by the 1980s the genre had reverted to a patriarchal, domestic setting in which men largely dispensed wisdom and women kept house. Even *The Cosby Show*‘s Claire Huxtable, notable for her status as a lawyer, was still able to do it all in the home, ensuring that she did not threaten the motherhood script (see, e.g., Gray 2006; Jones 1992).

By the 1980s’ end, sitcoms were one battlefield in the “Mommy Wars.” While *The Cosby Show* was still television’s highest rated sitcom, it had numerous domesticics supporting its underlying American middle-class patriarchal values including *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Full House* (which romanticized the mother by removing and lamenting her), *Growing Pains*, and *Who’s the Boss*. All of these programs had men either running the house or providing moral guidance in the case of *Who’s the Boss?* and the wise father figure is the household’s authoritative center. This symbolically preserved the patriarchal norm of the nuclear family, even while women worked outside the home—for example; Claire Huxtable is a lawyer and Angela Bower of *Who’s the Boss?* is an advertising executive. Against these portrayals of family life, we saw the sexually frustrated Bundys from *Married … with Children*, *Roseanne*’s dysfunctional domesticity, and *Murphy Brown*’s titular character who became a single mother, sparking an outrage from then-vice-president Dan Quayle. These programs expanded what it meant to be a mother in a sitcom, especially *Murphy Brown*’s single-mother role and *Roseanne*’s ruthlessly feminist working-class employed mother (Crotty 1995; Lee 1992).

*The Simpsons* was born into this world, which *South Park* and *Family Guy* would also explicitly reference (Gray 2006; Turner 2004). All three programs are set in the context of families, although *South Park* is much more about the boys’ adventures and, as such, they spend less time in the family living room and kitchen and more time in school or their titular hometown’s snow-covered backyards. However, the nuclear family model is intact in these programs, and the division of labor between men and women is unthreatened. In *The Simpsons*, Marge is trapped in the mothering script when it comes to her labor. Following the sitcom format of having the norm disrupted by an external force, only to have that disruption nullified by a series of madcap antics and everything restored by the episode’s end, Marge’s labor outside the home is frequently shown as a disruption and she returns home to care for her husband and children (Henry 2007; Neuhaus 2010). In *Family Guy* Lois is even more entrapped in the domestic sphere, which she leaves far less frequently for the workplace than Marge does. The married mothers in *South Park* do not work, which helps establish Liane Cartman as a deviant in terms of her marital and work status. Indeed, the domesticic’s standards for women and the larger family are at the core of these programs, although the loving, sheltering family is, as we shall see, called into question in *Family Guy*. With this emphasis on maintaining domestic tranquility in the “traditional” sitcom and the willingness to exploit the underlying tensions such tranquility covers in the “edgier” sitcoms, the culture wars exposed the domestic tensions impinging on family life in the post-war era. Our three programs became part of a critical voice that attacks certain cultural norms the domesticic reinforces,
while leaving its patriarchal, consumerist, racist, and heterosexual family norms unchallenged.

METHODS
This article uses narrative content analysis methods on selected episodes from _The Simpsons_, _Family Guy_, and _South Park_ to explain the significance of our three television mothers. Methodologically, the examples we selected were chosen after undergoing what Stuart Hall describes as “a long preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his [sic] material” (1975:15). David Feltmate has been watching these three programs for over a decade and has published on their content regarding other aspects of social life (see, e.g., Feltmate 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Kimberly P. Brackett, meanwhile, has been researching motherhood and has spent over a decade absorbing and analyzing discourses from the “Mommy Wars.” When we combined our insights from each soak, a pattern emerged across the programs which revealed the latent assumption that motherhood and sexuality are related and that the children are the beneficiaries or victims of their mother’s sexuality. The symbolic discourses from the Mommy Wars are born out in the three programs’ representations of motherhood. The episodes discussed were then selected based on their extensive discussions of motherhood or because they circulate in online forums, wikis, blogs, and in academic literature as examples of these characters’ sexuality and/or status as mothers. This echoes other studies in the interactionist study of mass media that demonstrate how symbolic discourses are carried out in mediated form (e.g., Bonsu 2007; Healey 2010; Lio, Melzer, and Reese 2008; Paolucci and Richardson 2006a, 2006b; Shoshana and Teman 2006). Indeed, mass media is effective in no small part because it broadcasts the micro media of everyday interaction. As there are over 200 episodes each of _Family Guy_ and _South Park_ and over 500 episodes of _The Simpsons_, there are an unwieldy number of examples we could have used. The cases in which the three mothers we study are explicitly addressed and examined as mothers and as sexual beings, therefore, drew our focus. Furthermore, they facilitate an interpretive sociological analytical framework based in the phenomenological and symbolic interactionist tradition of gender and role analysis to explicate the underlying significance of these patterns (see, e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Douglas and Micheals 2004; Hall and Bishop 2009; Hays 1996; West and Zimmerman 1987). How they behave as sexual women and as mothers tells us a great deal about how the programs’ creators have internalized and interacted with the larger institutional discourses which they convey through their programs.

MOTHERING AND SEX UNDER THE MOTHERHOOD SCRIPT
How do Marge, Lois, and Liane meet the motherhood script’s demands? If we note that Hoffnung’s (1998) four tenets of the motherhood mystique — that motherhood is the path for women to achieve and fulfill the essential accomplishments of
womanhood; the tasks assigned to mothers synthesize harmoniously; good mothers enjoy all the mothering role’s aspects and tasks; and women should display only positive attitudes toward their mothering duties so that the children are not negatively affected — intersect, we can start mapping these four aspects and also see how they meet Ruddick’s three maternal demands placed upon women (preservation, growth, and social acceptability). We start with how these mothers use motherhood to fulfill themselves as women. As we will see, sexuality — and the more one strays from the “traditional family” model of a wife having sex with her husband — becomes a major stumbling block for Lois and Liane, leading them to be cast as worse mothers than Marge.

Marge Simpson best fits the motherliness ideal. Marge has always been presented as a devoted mother who would do everything for her family, simultaneously meeting Hoffnung’s first three tenets while preserving her children and helping to nurture them. She separates her children’s lunches for maximum freshness (“Home Sweet Home-dim-dum-doodily”), is a cleaning mastermind (e.g., “Regarding Margie”), and is a resourceful chef (“All’s Fair in Oven War”). She loves her children even though her son Bart is a brat, her daughter Lisa suffers from chronic melancholy, and her baby girl Maggie has a propensity for shooting rifles. She tends to her family by keeping her house as clean as possible and by cooking massive meals. It is to her that the children go when they need help and it is her disappointment that they fear. For example, in “Marge Be Not Proud” Bart is caught stealing a video game from the local Try-N-Save which causes Marge to give up on him. Bart can only make things right by going to the store, purchasing a respectable picture of himself for Christmas, and including the receipt so Marge can see he learned his lesson. This, of course, earns her son an outpouring of maternal joy. Later, when Bart seeks emancipation from his parents, it is not to get away from Marge, but Homer’s abusiveness (“Barting Over”). Even when Marge gives Lisa bad advice, such as telling her to smile when she is sad so that everybody will like her, she has a change of heart after seeing others manipulate Lisa and not attend to her suffering. She tells Lisa instead to be true to herself (“Moaning Lisa”). For all her efforts she is seen as saintly, a good mother despite the fact that her children are tainted by their oafish father.

Lois is less likely to indulge in motherly preservation and fostering her children’s growth. Early in the series she was a doting housewife who wanted respect from her buffoonish husband Peter and, occasionally, a chance to work outside the home. Lois has since become a much more ambivalent mother — especially toward her daughter Meg. In fact, after Meg was born Lois became pro-choice (Michels 2005). In another episode, she helps Meg pick out clothing for her make over and gives her daughter a short shirt that says “Sperm Dumpster” on it (“Don’t Make Me Over”). She also calls her son, Chris, her “favorite mistake” since the lawsuit from the broken condom leading to his conception paid for their house (“Emission Impossible”). Even so, she also set him up to be hazed on his first day at high school (“Jungle Love”). Perhaps the level of disjuncture from the expected desires of motherhood being completely fulfilling and seamlessly tying all aspects of her family life together harmoniously
comes in season eight’s “Partial Terms of Endearment” in which Lois serves as a surrogate mother and the baby’s biological parents die, forcing her to consider keeping the child as her own. The episode ends with the following exchange:

Lois: Well, I think we made the right decision. I mean, sure, havin’ a baby costs a fortune. There’s cutbacks on things we love. There’s diapers and cryin’ and late nights with no sleep. Flu shots and mumps and driver’s ed and college tuition. But you know what? It’s one more person to share the world with. Another little voice in the back seat of the car. One more Griffin to love and to love us in return.

After a short pause, Peter turns, faces the camera, and says “She had the abortion.” This is about as far from the expected joys of mothering that one can expect, except that Lois remains a wife and a mother. She is part of the accepted institutional structures of late modern American society, and while her mothering may be increasingly apathetic, she is not an outright object of scorn — that is saved for single mother Liane Cartman of South Park.

Perhaps we should not be so hard on Lois. In “LOIS: Portrait of a Mother (Or, Nevermind Death, Motherhood is a Bitch),” philosopher Stephanie Empey (2007) argues that the role of mother and its domestic expectations — cooking, cleaning, caring for children and husband, being an unpaid chauffeur — disciplines Lois and that she normally does a good job. Acknowledging the blurred lines between motherhood and domestic labor (a childless wife can still be burdened with unpaid domestic labor), we can concede that somehow Lois (like Marge) can keep a near flawless home which is (like Marge’s) constantly threatened by her husband’s and children’s stupidity and recklessness. That, however, does not explain why Lois engages in violent sexual activities (more on this later), is abusive toward Meg, and has become increasingly indifferent to her children as time passes. On one hand, she fights the trend of sitcom mothers who are relentlessly cheerful and maternal. Lois is her own woman, but her increasing indifference toward her children clearly indicates that she does not meet Hoffnung’s third and fourth traits. That is, she does not love all the motherhood script’s aspects, nor does she display only positive attitudes toward her children. This calls her very motherhood into question. Part of the motherhood role is self-sacrifice, as Empey demonstrates. Lois, however, continually puts aside self-sacrifice in later seasons and in season ten’s “Seahorse Seashell Party” Meg erupts, chastising Lois for her smugness, cruelty, and imperfection as a mother after Lois scolds Meg for lecturing Chris on his brothering:

Lois: Look, the bottom line here Meg is that you’re just taking your problems out on everyone else.
Meg: Oh, my problems? Oh, I see. Is this coming from my role model mother? The shoplifter, the drug addict, the porn star, the whore who let Gene Simmons and Bill Clinton go to town on her?
Lois: Oh, so what? All those things are behind me now. I’m a better person now because of those experiences.
Meg: Are you? Are you a better person?
Lois: What’s your point Meg?
Meg: My point is that with all the irresponsible, reckless, idiotic behavior in your past, that somehow [chuckles], somehow you have the nerve — the arrogance — to consistently and ruthlessly point out my short comings!

Lois: All right! Well, fine! I’m not the perfect mother! Who is?!

Meg: [chuckles] Not only are you not the perfect mother, you’re the farthest thing from. From the moment you gave birth to me I had to trust you. I had no choice. I needed you to protect me from the world, to be my guide, to help me navigate the difficult, confusing, and vulnerable journey to becoming a person. You have done none of those things. You’re my mother and you took a child’s trust and smashed it into bits in a seventeen year-long mission to destroy something that you killed a long time ago. And honestly, when I turn eighteen I don’t know that I ever want to see you again.

[Lois breaks down crying.] (“Seahorse Seashell Party”)

The family deteriorates until Meg makes a false apology and takes the blame for disrupting the Griffins’ normal routines. Lois never acknowledges the truth about what Meg told her, instead laying the blame at her daughter’s feet.

Meg’s rant combines Lois’ failures as a mother and her sexual history. Note that two of her four labels for Lois (porn-star and whore) slander Lois’ sexuality. In so doing, Meg (and by extension Family Guy’s creative staff) links Lois’ promiscuity and her poor mothering. If Lois were moral she would be a good mother and not so licentious. When Lois acted lasciviously, she succumbed to one side of the sex/motherhood dichotomy, taking a narcissistic route and forgoing good mothering. While the series started with Lois being a caring and doting housewife, by the tenth season she is a cruel, uncaring, sexually wild woman. Her own daughter highlights such failures.

When it comes to who loves mothering, does a good job, and receives social accolades for her efforts, Liane Cartman is the clear loser. Although we will discuss the complexities of Marge and Lois’ sexuality and its relationship with their mothering duties shortly, Liane’s failure to mother her sociopathic son Eric has always been linked to her sexuality. Liane is a single mother for one reason: She is a “dirty slut.” At least, that is according to the title of the first season’s final episode in which the people of South Park try to identify Eric’s father. Eric was conceived the night of the drunken barn dance, when Liane was last seen having sex with the entire lineup of the 1989 Denver Broncos (“Cartman’s Mom is a Dirty Slut”). While it was originally claimed that she had sex with another woman as a hermaphrodite (“Cartman’s Mom is Still a Dirty Slut”), it was later revealed that somebody on the Denver Broncos sired her son (“201”). She has also stared in German feces fetish pornography (Parker 1999), been on the cover of Crack Whore magazine (“Pinkeye”), and slept with half the town. As the episode titles state, she is poor, white, “slutty” trash in South Park. She is also a horrible mother judging by her child Eric’s sociopathic behavior — his most infamous crime was killing a boy’s parents and then feeding them to him (“Scott Tenorman Must Die”).

For most of the series, there were two reasons why Liane was cast as a horrible mother: She is too busy with her own sexual needs to care for Eric and she lets him walk all over her. Part of this is because of loneliness. In “Tsst,” dog whisperer Cesar
Milan teaches her to control Eric the same way you control a dog: Show dominance, nip him on the neck, and otherwise ignore him. Liane accomplishes this because she is dedicated to building a relationship — not with her son who is in need of her guidance — but with Milan who is uninterested. While Eric loses weight and learns to be responsible, he quickly reverts to his old ways when his mother offers to buy back his love at the episode’s conclusion. She loves her son, but she has not properly balanced her domestic responsibilities and sexual desires to show appropriate love and care for him. She has denied three of the four tenets of good mothers — she does not treat motherhood as the path to womanhood, instead she is sexually voracious; she does not enjoy all the mothering role’s aspects and tasks; and she does not display only positive attitudes toward her motherly duties so as to spare her children emotional damages. Indeed, Eric is well preserved, but his personal growth and social acceptability leave much to be desired. The only thing that Liane excels at is synthesizing the need to maintain a home and her child seamlessly.

Cultural studies scholar Toni Johnson-Woods disagrees with us. While Liane is cast as a “dirty slut,” Johnson-Woods (2007:180) argues that “she breaks every television rule proscribed for women.” She is both a domestic goddess and a whore. Her home is organized, her child (over)fed and doted upon, and Johnson-Woods contends that “she is not defined by her sexuality and it’s not expressed as power . . . her sexuality is normalized as an economic necessity — she does it to support her family” (180). According to Johnson-Woods, because of this she is both accepted by the community and her independence is assured since she does not need a man to support her (unlike Marge and Lois).

Cultural studies scholar Victoria Nagy, however, disagrees (2010:14). We agree with her that:

Liane is the embodiment of the stock single mother stereotype and it is through this stereotype that she is “one very subversive woman” (Johnson-Woods 2007:180) to the expectations of mothers and motherhood in the U.S. The fact that she is the antithesis of the other mothers in South Park and allows Cartman to do as he pleases and panders to his wishes and demands means that she is to be held responsible for everything that Cartman is — and Cartman is not a “good” boy. (Nagy 2010:14)

Nagy is correct that Liane’s permissive sexuality allows us to interpret her as a bad mother and provides an illogical explanation for Eric’s bad behavior. How a mother meets her sexual needs and how she raises her children are not necessarily correlated and the moral values and normative evaluations ascribed to both sex and mothering are culturally contingent. They are social constructions that have their own particular cultural (il)logic that inspires the cultural scripts that women use to organize their own lives and that comedy writers use to evaluate the women in the world.

We can see the potentially contradictory yet powerful logic of institutionalized scripts in how Marge and Lois navigate the relationship between sexuality and motherhood. In achieving full womanhood through preserving her family with love and enrichment and providing an opportunity for her children to grow into full human
beings, Marge also has a fulfilling sex life which is exclusively monogamous with her husband, Homer. Her needs are openly acknowledged in the episode “Grandpa vs. Sexual Inadequacy” when, after months of involuntary abstinence she confronts Homer. He responds, “Marge, there’s just too much pressure, what with my job, the kids, traffic snarls, political strife at home and abroad. But I promise you, the second all those things go away, we’ll have sex.” Marge replies that she “just can’t wait that long” and then suggests they get a book—a tasteful book—to help with their problems. Her good girl behavior finds its way into the bedroom, although she also has a wild streak that she unleashes in “Natural Born Kissers” when she and Homer discover that having sex in public places rekindles their romance. Homer’s one-liner from that episode reveals the tensions between being a good woman and mother and what society assumes is an impure sexual woman: “There’s that dirty girl I married.”

Marge’s sexuality and her role as expert mother invert one very important script: Bart was conceived out of wedlock. As detailed in the 1991 episode “I Married Marge,” when Marge and Homer were in their early 20s they “joined the castle club” by having sex in a castle on a miniature golf course, leading to Bart’s conception. Although Homer and Marge end up marrying at “Shotgun Pete’s 24 Hour Wedding Chapel” before Bart’s birth, his very existence and character play with the motherhood mystique’s underlying assumptions. That is, children are to be conceived after marriage. Ignore the fact that for years brides have been pregnant at their weddings; the moral rules for women who would be mothers are conveyed through the stigmatization of single parent families in political and popular culture as the cause of poverty, teenage pregnancy, and even violent crime (Harper and McLanahan 2004; Popone 2009; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Marge avoids this fate, but still brings some of its taint into her marriage and Bart’s behavior is a threat to Marge’s social acceptability. Bart is destructive (in “I Married Marge” he sets Homer’s tie on fire with a lighter even though he is only ten minutes old), rude, lazy, disrespectful, and frequently in trouble.

Yet, Marge loves him. Bart is her “special little guy” and she is the one who sees the good in him. Furthermore, while Marge is often written about in academic and popular presses, Bart’s conception is not treated as particularly problematic (e.g., Delaney 2008:116). This is surprising, as it is a narrative element that disrupts the traditional motherhood script’s smooth navigating of marital domesticity. It mirrors certain women’s realities and it is not an uncommon event, but it is different from the traditional sitcom mother’s storyline and the expected social roles for women in American culture. It is hard to remember that while non-nuclear families are now common in American sitcoms, when this episode aired in late 1991 the culture wars were in full swing. Marge is both a safe and dangerous woman in those times; a domesticated, dedicated housewife and an unrepentant mother of a near-bastard. The Simpsons’ writers left this juxtaposition bare for their humor to celebrate a dedicated woman who lives within the motherhood script without submitting to a puritanical sexual one. She is a dedicated mother and committed, monogamous wife.
As Meg’s rant against her mother shows, Lois Griffin is not nearly as confined to the marriage — and her family — as Marge. Over the years she has become an intensely sexual woman who is willing to rape her husband (“Prick Up Your Ears”; “Lethal Weapons”) and she has a checkered past, having slept with Gene Simmons of KISS (“A Very Special Family Guy Freakin’ Christmas”), made a pornographic film (“And I’m Joyce Kenny”), and worked as prostitute (“No Chris Left Behind”). She also cheats on Peter with Bill Clinton (“Bill and Peter’s Bogus Journey”) and alludes to having had past lesbian affairs. Her sexuality has become increasingly ferocious just as her mothering has faltered. Indeed, Meg’s rant explicitly shames her mother for her sexual pursuits and highlights the inherent tension between being a mother, the pivotal center and glue of the domestic family, and being a woman with sexual needs and a sexual history that clashes with the motherhood script’s moral foundations. When things stop being about children first and husband second, then mom appears out of control and needs to be brought back in line. Not insignificantly, it is Lois’ daughter who puts her mother in her place. Yet, in doing so, her mother is humiliated by the script’s cultural authority and meeting her sexual needs and desires which are not deemed important within that framework.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Discussing motherhood as a cultural script that constrains real people is a sociological practice that relies upon certain foundational axioms. That social reality is something human beings construct through ongoing interpersonal relationships, that these constructions take on an objectivated state and are pressed upon us as if they were objective by people around us through everyday social interactions, and that these interactions lead to varying stratifications which cause distinction and division among different social groups and varying levels of alienation and integration within individuals are theoretical facts for a great many sociologists and are supported by some of our most foundational sociological theoretical works (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1934). As C. Wright Mills reminded us half a century ago, understanding these constructions comes with a moral and political responsibility to speak of their dangers to those in power and to help those constrained by social scripts understand their predicaments, ultimately aiding them in organizing themselves into freer, more fulfilled people (2000 [1959]:184–186). As such, any public usage of a social construction is fair game for sociologists in their goals of understanding the world, explaining it, and helping people to change cultural patterns so that empirical social life manifests core social values in more realistic and concrete ways.

Throughout this article we have argued that these programs reinforce the dichotomy in the motherhood/sexuality script rather than transcend it. Even though the programs do not deploy their satirical forces against this institution as they do against others, we acknowledge that their jokes introduce a discursive space to
consider mothers being sexual people in ways that motherhood mystique advocates do not address. Knowing that mom and dad had sex to conceive a child is one thing in the abstract, it is completely different when people are faced with the fact that their parents are human beings with sexual urges that they act upon. Repeating jokes and creating characters that continue this dichotomy—wherein one can be either a good mother or a “dirty girl”—perpetuates the script. They are part of the echo chamber which repeats these ideas in different variations, eventually achieving the motherhood script’s sedimentation (that is, it becomes “congealed in recollection as recognizable and memorable entities” [Berger and Luckmann 1966:67]) which limits sexual expression (see also Douglas and Micheals 2004; Hays 1996).

Yet, the sedimented pattern is heavily restrictive on mothers, especially those who are not married to their children’s fathers. Marge and Lois navigate the motherhood dichotomy much better than Liane in no small part because they are married. They have husbands and marriage is an institution that is defined, in part, as legitimating sexual intercourse between people. Even then, they are not given room to escape the motherhood mystique’s social constructions. It is at this point that the construction becomes a social constriction—a construct that constrains the development of personal or collective freedoms—expecting submission to existing norms which are opposed to the individual’s or group’s needs and/or values. These constrictions require actions, or the public expression of actions, that conform to the externally imposed standard. In order to fulfill their care obligations and avoid public derision, mothers must appear to be sexual only within the context deemed appropriate for their social category. Sexuality and motherhood have become entangled in a moral equation which we see as inherently problematic. The “one size fits all” nature of the motherhood-sexuality script that these programs reinforce denies women, their partners, and their children the flexibility and freedom to nurture themselves and each other through the unrestrained exchanges of mutual love, companionship, responsibility, and meaning that characterize a person working to her fullest potential as an individual with biological and emotional needs. The larger social structure restricts meeting sexual needs and expressing love sexually even as it enables a mother’s ability to meet her family’s needs. Repeating the idea that good mothers are married women who are monogamous and not adventurous in their sex lives tells women who do not meet these standards that they are moral failures who will soon have material ruin brought upon them.

The Simpsons and South Park have both been put forth as programs engaged in the politics of “oppositional culture” (Alberti 2004; Gournelos 2009), but when it comes to motherhood and sexuality their political capital is invested in the status quo. While they will portray same-sex relationships positively, heterosexual mothers are still confined to the sitcom’s historical scripts which mirror a conservative discussion of motherhood in contemporary America. These women are their biological children’s mothers, their moral standing is judged on the children’s behavior, and the children’s behavior is linked to their mother’s sexuality and whether or not
certain segments of society deem her sex legitimate. The mothers who conform to a self-sacrificing monogamy within the confines of marriage are treated as the ideal. Life in the late modern world is not nearly so simple.

Indeed, with changing family structures reflecting the greater numbers of divorced and never-married women heading households, single-motherhood is significant — constituting 13.131 million American family households (16.23% of total family households), and containing 17.532 million children (23.7% of all children) in 2013 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2013a, 2013b) — and with it an increased risk of poverty. Employment is not easily acquired and when it is obtained, finding surrogate care for one’s children becomes a risky and expensive proposition. Married couples can find themselves stretched across continents as one partner moves to another location in search of work or to care for other family members (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Some mothers live with the father of their children (either in or out of wedlock), but in other cases it is best for everybody if one parent or the other has no role in the family’s life. For example, in extremely volatile marriages, children’s mental health improves following divorce (Musick and Meier 2010). In light of these changes it makes little sense to try and confine women to a script that would shackle them with great, unpaid responsibilities when the risks are so severe. A partner who leaves or dies immediately puts the woman and her children at risk. In this scenario, the fact that the domestic mother script is a social constriction is laid bare. A woman’s ability to find fulfillment through the script is intimately tied to her husband’s economic and legitimating role. While the mother is supposed to be deeply tied to her children, she also meets the sexual needs of her provider husband (but not her own needs — they are [hopefully] met by proxy). Without this legitimating man, the motherhood script deteriorates and the woman is punished by either being on welfare or being torn between labor and childrearing. All the while, she is defined by the social roles she must fulfill to care for her children and the man in her life (this script’s heteronormativity is also a relevant topic for further debate). In short, she must be a “good” mother.

Marge, Lois, and Liane are all constrained in various ways by their adherence to this script. That their characters and narratives work speaks to the prevalence of the motherhood script and that jokes are made about their sexuality speaks to the script’s moral influence. Yet, humor is a double-edged sword. In opening a discursive space, there is always a chance that people will question the grounds upon which the joke is told (see also Paolucci and Richardson 2006b). That The Simpsons, Family Guy, and South Park all choose to close their character constructions by reverting to the social norm does not mean that the rest of us need to follow. By thinking through the constrictions of motherhood we can work to turn those constrictions into positive constructions instead. When mothers can mother, labor, have sex, and find meaningful and fulfilling lives in the intersection of all three without having to worry about being stigmatized for not meeting “maternal” standards, then we will know that a new script has been written and more positive jokes about the relationship between sex and mothering can be told — ones reflecting the simple reality that being
a good mother and a sexual being are not mutually exclusive. We can only wait for such joyful laughter.

REFERENCES


**ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)**

**David Feltmate** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Auburn University at Montgomery where he specializes in the sociology of religion and conducts research that bridges the sociologies of religion, mass media, popular culture, humor, and knowledge. He is currently working on a book manuscript examining humorous representations of religion in *The Simpsons, South Park*, and *Family Guy* in light of American religious diversity debates.

**Kimberly P. Brackett** is a distinguished teaching Associate Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean of Liberal Arts, Auburn University at Montgomery. Her areas of teaching and research include family, social psychology, and gender.